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### ABOUT THE BLOG

All We Can Eat is a meeting place for the food-obsessed, a traffic signal at the ever-crowded intersection of politics, culture, aesthetics, desire and the dinner plate.

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## Steering Local Foodies to Federal Funds

*"Imagine a business is formed, using USDA loan money, to aggregate local farm products so that the volume is sufficient to serve a large school system..."*



Kathleen Merrigan wants to steer local food entrepreneurs to more than \$1 billion in federal money. (U.S. Department of Agriculture)

It's not hard to imagine a business like that. That's exactly what the new [Local Food Hub](#) in Charlottesville that I wrote about in yesterday's Food section is trying to do. But Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan wants more people to dream big – and to use USDA money to achieve their goals.

"I suspect that many USDA program are underutilized by those seeking to build local and regional food systems," Merrigan wrote in an Aug. 26 memo ([PDF](#)). "I would like to play the role of matchmaker during this administration."

In the seven-page letter, Merrigan highlighted three existing USDA programs that could aid those trying to build local food systems: the Community Facilities Program, the Business and Industry Guarantee Loan Program and the Value-Added Producer Grant Program.

If your eyes glazed over reading that, let me put it another way: That's \$1.24 billion in funds that could be used for guarantee loans and to support new farmers markets, community kitchens and local food businesses. Merrigan imagines money going to finance mobile slaughterhouses, to create cooking classes and to market premium, local ice cream or pasture-raised lamb.

None of the money in these programs is new, per se. But the memo is more evidence that the USDA is actively supporting local and regional food systems. More programs are in the works. In the coming weeks, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and Merrigan plan to announce a new effort, dubbed "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food," which aims to expand markets for locally grown food.

-- Jane Black

By Jane Black | August 27, 2009; 10:00 AM ET  
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