

Release No. 0440.09
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USDA Launches 'Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food' Initiative to Connect Consumers with Local Producers to Create New Economic Opportunities for Communities

WASHINGTON, September 15, 2009 - Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan today announced a new initiative - 'Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food' - to begin a national conversation to help develop local and regional food systems and spur economic opportunity. To launch the initiative, Secretary Vilsack recorded a video to invite Americans to join the discussion and share their ideas for ways to support local agriculture. The video, one of many means by which USDA will engage in this conversation, can be viewed at USDA's YouTube channel, www.youtube.com/usda. Producers and consumers can comment on the 'Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food' YouTube playlist, as well as submit videos or provide comments on this initiative by e-mailing KnowYourFarmer@usda.gov.

"An American people that is more engaged with their food supply will create new income opportunities for American agriculture," said Vilsack. "Reconnecting consumers and institutions with local producers will stimulate economies in rural communities, improve access to healthy, nutritious food for our families, and decrease the amount of resources to transport our food."

The 'Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food' initiative, chaired by Deputy Secretary Merrigan, is the focus of a task force with representatives from agencies across USDA who will help better align the Department's efforts to build stronger local and regional food systems. This week alone, USDA will announce approximately \$65 million in funding for 'Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food' initiatives.

"Americans are more interested in food and agriculture than at any other time since most families left the farm," said Merrigan. "'Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food' seeks to focus that conversation on supporting local and regional food systems to strengthen American agriculture by promoting sustainable agricultural practices and spurring economic opportunity in rural communities."

In the months to come, cross-cutting efforts at USDA will seek to use existing USDA programs to break down structural barriers that have inhibited local food systems from thriving. Today, USDA announced a small initial group of moves that seek to connect local production and consumption and promote local-scale sustainable operations:

- USDA's Risk Management Agency announced \$3.4 million in funding for collaborative outreach and assistance programs to socially disadvantaged and underserved farmers. These programs will support 'Know You Farmer' goals by helping producers adopt new and direct marketing practices. For example, nearly \$10,000 in funding for the University of Minnesota will bring together experts on food safety and regulations for a discussion of marketing to institutions like K-12 schools, colleges, universities, hospitals and other health care facilities.
- USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service proposed regulations to implement a new voluntary cooperative program under which select state-inspected establishments will be eligible to ship meat and poultry products in interstate commerce. The new program was created in the 2008 Farm Bill and will provide new economic opportunities for small meat and poultry establishments, whose markets are currently limited.
- USDA's Rural Development announced \$4.4 million in grants to help 23 local business cooperatives in 19 states. The member-driven and member-owned cooperative business model has been successful for rural enterprises, and bring rural communities closer to the process of moving from production-to-consumption as they work to improve their products and expand their appeal in the marketplace.
- USDA's Rural Development will also announce a Rural Business Opportunity Grant in the amount of \$150,000 to the Northwest Food Processors Association. The grant will strengthen the relationship between local food processors and customers in parts of Idaho, Oregon and Washington, and will also help the group reduce energy consumption, a major cost for food processors.

As the 'Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food' initiative evolves, USDA will continue to build on the momentum and ideas from the 2008 Farm Bill and target its existing programs and develop new ones to pursue sustainable agriculture and support for local and regional food systems.

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