



THE DEPUTY SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE  
WASHINGTON, D.C.  
20250-0100

**Date: October 27, 2009**

**From: USDA Deputy Secretary Kathleen A. Merrigan**

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kathleen Merrigan".

**Subject: USDA Research, Education and Economics support for local and regional food systems**

Local and regional food systems are exciting hotbeds of innovation. USDA can help speed that innovation through our programs in research and economic analysis, and we can multiply their benefits through education and outreach. To that end, this memorandum highlights some programs in the Research, Education and Economics mission area.

Programs you can apply to for grants to develop, test, and educate about innovations:

- (1) Community Food Projects
- (2) Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program
- (3) Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education
- (4) Small Business Innovation Research
- (5) Specialty Crops Research Initiative
- (6) Organic Agriculture Research and Extension
- (7) Agriculture and Food Research Initiative

Programs where you can get information and technical assistance:

- (8) Agricultural Research Service
- (9) Economic Research Service
- (10) National Agricultural Statistics Service
- (11) National Agricultural Library
- (12) Cooperative Extension

Please share this information with your colleagues and partners. Thank you for all you continue to do to help local and regional food systems thrive.

### (1) Community Food Projects

The Community Food Projects grant program funds low-income communities to address food access issues as well as nutrition and farm issues. It funds comprehensive, community-based solutions to food systems, includes environmental stewardship, social and economic justice in projects. Private non-profit organizations are eligible. Examples of activities in CFPCGP include farmer's markets, youth farms, urban agriculture, farm to school, re-establishing indigenous food production, mobile markets, cooperative stores, community gardens, native food gathering, community food assessments, farm to institution. The next open solicitation will be September 21-November 19, 2009. See: [www.nifa.usda.gov/fo/communityfoodprojects.cfm](http://www.nifa.usda.gov/fo/communityfoodprojects.cfm)  
For examples of funded projects see: [www.whyhunger.org/programs/fslc/features/community-food-projects-database.html](http://www.whyhunger.org/programs/fslc/features/community-food-projects-database.html)

- a community kitchen making value-added products in the Appalachian mountains of Tennessee;
- a revitalization of Native American dryland farming practices in the Sonoran desert of Arizona;
- a teen-run juice and muffin bar on the Lower East Side of New York City;
- a pork producers cooperative in rural Missouri marketing sustainably-raised meat; and
- an urban agricultural center and farming enterprise among Puerto Rican immigrants in Massachusetts

### (2) Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program

To support the nation's beginning farmers and ranchers, the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) makes competitive grants to new and established local and regional training, education, outreach, and technical assistance initiatives in the United States and its territories for entering, establishing, building and managing successful farm and ranch enterprises. BFRDP will also fund Educational Enhancement Teams for evaluation, coordination and enhancement of beginning farmer and rancher training programs. In FY 2009, one Curriculum and Training Clearinghouse is being established to develop a scoping project of all beginning farmer and rancher activities, develop an online clearing house and help enhance outcome based reporting. The FY 2010 Request for Application is expected to be published in January 2010 with more details on program requirements and submission instructions. See: [www.nifa.usda.gov/fo/beginningfarmerandrancher.cfm](http://www.nifa.usda.gov/fo/beginningfarmerandrancher.cfm)

### (3) Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education

The SARE program is a competitive grant making and outreach program with the mission of advancing sustainable innovations to the whole of American agriculture. Since it began in 1988, SARE has funded more than 4,000 sustainable agriculture research, education and professional development projects across the country. Sharing project results is a cornerstone of the SARE program, with field days, workshops and conferences in every region—and an Outreach office producing an ever-growing library of books, bulletins, online resources as well as a vast archive of know-your-farmer profiles of SARE grantees. SARE is uniquely grassroots, administered by four regional offices guided by administrative councils of local experts. While every region

offers Research and Education, Professional Development, Farmer/Rancher Research grants, some regions also offer Graduate Student, Sustainable Community Innovation, and Planning grants. Application dates and formats vary by program and region (see [www.sare.org](http://www.sare.org)). A sampler of SARE projects:

- Iowa dairy farmers tested marketing strategies then turned their creamery store into a local foods marketplace, featuring farm products from 76 other families.
- In Mississippi, more than 400 educators and processors received training in sugar cane and sorghum syrup production, processing and value-added marketing.
- In the Northeast, a farmer-educator program featuring a renowned expert in community supported agriculture helped producers assess potential CSA ventures.
- A collaborative of tribal communities and farmers, ranchers and service providers in the Four Corner states taught nearly 500 producers and buyers about such topics as cold-frame building and season extension.

#### (4) Small Business Innovation Research

The Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program at USDA makes competitively awarded grants to qualified small businesses to support high quality, advanced concepts research related to important scientific problems and opportunities in agriculture that could lead to significant public benefit if successful. The objectives of the SBIR Program are to stimulate technological innovations in the private sector; strengthen the role of small businesses in meeting Federal research and development needs; increase private sector commercialization of innovations derived from USDA-supported research and development efforts; and foster and encourage participation by women-owned and socially and economically disadvantaged small business firms in technological innovations. SBIR funds projects in many categories relevant to local and regional food systems, including plant and animal production, food science and nutrition, aquaculture, marketing and trade, and small and mid-sized farms (see [www.nifa.usda.gov/funding/sbir/sbir\\_synopsis.html](http://www.nifa.usda.gov/funding/sbir/sbir_synopsis.html)). Examples of funded projects include:

- A Kansas family farm conducted economic analysis and developed product standards and a detailed plan for selling products to a retail supermarket chain and established an alliance of 150 family farms that sell agricultural products under a common brand
- A marketing company in Maine researched markets, developed and tested products, and created branding strategies for selling lobster and other Maine seafood
- A Massachusetts company tested an affordable milk processing technology for small dairy farms to use to process their own milk for local markets
- A Hawaiian company has developed procedures for producing high quality chocolate and in the process created a new market for cacao growers in Hawaii

#### (5) Specialty Crops Research Initiative

The Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI) was established to address critical industry issues through research and extension activities. SCRI gives priority to projects that are multistate, multi-institutional, and trans-disciplinary, and include explicit mechanisms to communicate results to producers and the public. Projects must address at least one of five focus areas:

research in plant breeding, genetics, and genomics to improve crop characteristics; efforts to identify and address threats from pests and diseases, including threats to specialty crop pollinators; efforts to improve production efficiency, productivity, and profitability over the long term; new innovations and technology, including improved mechanization and technologies that delay or inhibit ripening; and methods to prevent, detect, monitor, control, and respond to potential food safety hazards in the production and processing of specialty crops. For eligibility, due dates, and more information see [www.nifa.usda.gov/fo/specialtycropresearchinitiative.cfm](http://www.nifa.usda.gov/fo/specialtycropresearchinitiative.cfm). Release of the next request for applications is anticipated later this month. Examples of funded projects related to local and regional food systems include:

- A planning grant to identify constraints on increasing production and marketing of fresh market vegetables in the Great Lakes Region and plan research and extension needed to overcome those constraints
- A project to expand and test a multi-state collaborative to expand markets for specialty crops and value-added products for local food systems in the Midwest

#### (6) Organic Agriculture Research and Extension

The Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI) has eight priorities for organic agriculture: improving production, breeding, postharvest and processing methods; on-farm research and development in production, marketing and socioeconomics; evaluating conservation and environmental impacts; evaluating the economic feasibility of organic production for specific crops and regions; identifying marketing and policy constraints; exploring international trade opportunities; developing eXtension and other educational tools; and determining desirable traits, improving breeding methods and improving seed and other propagation materials for organic production. We anticipate the OREI request for proposals will come out in late fall with a proposal submission deadline of late January or early February. The 2009 RFA is available at: <http://www.nifa.usda.gov/funding/rfas/OREI.html>.

All OREI proposals require stakeholder input, so local growers and processors are involved in development and execution of most if not all projects. Local production is also supported by OREI proposals evaluating the economic feasibility of organic production for specific crops and regions, and by support for long-term on-farm research. According to a June 2009 ERS report, 'Emerging Issues in the US Organic Industry', in 2004, 24% of organic deliveries were made within an hour of the processing facility, and 30% were made regionally. A variety of local and organic food initiatives are emerging in response to an unmet need for local and organic products in farmers' markets, supermarkets and institutional settings.

In New England, demand for local organic food inspired new interest in growing bread-quality wheat. Maine farmers have long produced small grains for animal feed but lacked expertise in production for the demanding artisanal organic bread market. The University of Maine was awarded an OREI grant of \$1.3 million to partner with organic farmers, millers, and bakers to develop strategies for developing local organic bread wheat production emphasizing productivity, profitability, milling and baking quality, and flavor. Farmers will also receive training in evaluating the economic and agronomic aspects of organic bread wheat production.

## (7) Agriculture and Food Research Initiative

AFRI is a new competitive grant program to provide funding for fundamental and applied research, extension, and education to address food and agricultural sciences. While AFRI covers an equally broad scope of topics and will support many of the grant types offered by the former National Research Initiative (NRI), the new authority allows greater flexibility in the types of projects funded to include: single function projects in research, education and extension, and integrated research, education and/or extension awards. AFRI is the new core competitive grant program for research, education, and extension. It encompasses several different programs which cover a broad array of issues and topics important to US agriculture. The AFRI program for Small and Medium-Sized Farms, for example, has had a focus on increasing the value of agricultural products sold by small and medium-sized farms and increasing their share of the food dollar by creating on-farm value added activities. For eligibility, due dates, and other information, see [www.nifa.usda.gov/fo/agriculturalandfoodresearchinitiativeafri.cfm](http://www.nifa.usda.gov/fo/agriculturalandfoodresearchinitiativeafri.cfm). Examples of funded projects include:

- A study of the capacity of new business models for mid-scale, values-based food supply chains, led by the University of Wisconsin.
- Researchers at Rutgers University identified connections between U.S. produce growers and markets for ethnic produce and then made recommendations for production strategies to solve supply problems in the Eastern U.S.
- Researchers at the University of California at Davis worked to enhance the prosperity of small and medium-sized producers by studying effective distribution networks being utilized and educating others about factors that are critical to the development of these networks.

## (8) Agricultural Research Service

ARS has a nationwide network of USDA scientists carrying out research projects at over one hundred locations across the U.S., e.g., including a new urban agriculture pest management unit being developed at Beltsville. Its aim is to find solutions to agricultural problems that affect Americans every day, from field to table. A few of the ways that ARS research is contributing to local and regional food systems include:

- Analysis of the potential for local food production along the eastern seaboard, through geographic analysis of environmental, economic and social data, feeding into computer models that assess production and economic potential, in collaboration with several universities and other USDA agencies (see article at [www.ars.usda.gov/is/AR/archive/sep09/farms0909.htm](http://www.ars.usda.gov/is/AR/archive/sep09/farms0909.htm))
- Technology and research assistance in support of urban agriculture in Philadelphia, including new season-long strawberry varieties, extended growing season technologies such as greenhouses and high tunnels, using composting and on-site energy production techniques, organic control methods for insect and weed pests, pollinator management strategies, water re-use and irrigation technologies, methods to enhance soil quality and reclaim brown field soils, and computer decision tools for planning and management.

- Linking Arkansas and Oklahoma livestock, fresh produce, and agroforestry production systems research to new local and regional supply chains, in cooperation with Winrock International and others.
  - Research on food consumption, dietary guidelines, and other topics leading to improved dietary recommendations and a healthier population.
- See [www.ars.usda.gov](http://www.ars.usda.gov) for more information.

#### (9) Economic Research Service

ERS conducts research to inform public and private decision-making on economic and policy issues involving food, farming, natural resources, and rural development. Examples of ERS research relevant to local and regional food systems include:

- Economics of local food markets: The goals of this research include gaining a better understanding of the different definitions and characteristics of local food systems, examining barriers or external factors that inhibit the development and sustainability of local food production and markets, evaluating policy alternatives that might promote the development and sustainability of local food production and markets, and understanding the impacts of growth in local and regional food systems. See [www.ers.usda.gov/ConferenceCenter/LocalFoods/](http://www.ers.usda.gov/ConferenceCenter/LocalFoods/)
- Food-related energy use: This project examines food system technologies, eating habits, and food-related energy use to better understand the factors that determine future energy needs in the food system
- Food and nutrition: web-based “briefing rooms” have a wealth of information on topics related to diet, health, food and nutrition assistance ([www.ers.usda.gov/Browse/view.aspx?subject=FoodNutritionAssistanceFoodAssistanceNutritionResearchProgram](http://www.ers.usda.gov/Browse/view.aspx?subject=FoodNutritionAssistanceFoodAssistanceNutritionResearchProgram) )
- Organic agriculture: economic research, analysis, and information includes production and marketing of organic products ([www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Organic/](http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Organic/))
- Fruits and Vegetables: Briefing rooms inform policymakers and the public about the economics of fruit and vegetable markets and are used in assessing trends in food and nutrient consumption over time, for monitoring the potential of the food supply to meet the nutritional needs of Americans, and for examining relationships between food availability and diet-health risk. ([www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FruitAndTreeNuts/](http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FruitAndTreeNuts/) and [www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Vegetables/](http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Vegetables/) )

See [www.ers.usda.gov](http://www.ers.usda.gov) for more information.

#### (10) National Agricultural Statistics Service

NASS conducts hundreds of surveys every year and prepares reports covering virtually every aspect of U.S. agriculture. Production and supplies of food and fiber, prices paid and received by farmers, farm labor and wages, farm finances, chemical use, and changes in the demographics of U.S. producers are only a few examples. Of particular interest in local and regional food systems:

- Data on farm demographics and marketing: The Census of Agriculture reports have national, state, and county-level data on farm production (e.g., what is grown), marketing methods (including direct marketing and Community Supported Agriculture), and

demographics (who the farmers are) that can be very useful to people working on local and regional food systems

([www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Full\\_Report/index.asp](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Full_Report/index.asp))

- Organic agriculture: The 2007 Census of Agriculture showed more than 20,000 farms engaged in organic production in the United States. As a follow-up to the 2007 Census, USDA is conducting its first-ever, wide-scale survey of organic agriculture. ([www.agcensus.usda.gov/Surveys/Organic\\_Production\\_Survey/](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Surveys/Organic_Production_Survey/)).

See [www.nass.usda.gov](http://www.nass.usda.gov) for more information.

#### (11) National Agricultural Library

The National Agricultural Library (NAL) houses the world's largest and most accessible agricultural information collections of both paper and digital materials and serves as the nexus for a national network of state land-grant and USDA field libraries. NAL provides reference and information services, document delivery, and interlibrary borrowing services to a variety of audiences. Three of its specialized information centers are of particular interest to people working in local and regional food systems:

- The Alternative Farming Systems Information Center (AFSIC) specializes in identifying resources about sustainable food systems and practices, including community food systems, urban agriculture and gardening, value-adding, organic agriculture, and much more. ([afsic.nal.usda.gov/](http://afsic.nal.usda.gov/))
- The Food and Nutrition Information Center (FNIC) provides credible, accurate, and practical resources for nutrition and health professionals, educators, government personnel and consumers. ([fnic.nal.usda.gov/](http://fnic.nal.usda.gov/))
- The Rural Information Center (RIC) provides services for rural communities, local officials, organizations, businesses and rural citizens working to maintain the vitality of America's rural areas. ([ric.nal.usda.gov](http://ric.nal.usda.gov))

See [www.nal.usda.gov](http://www.nal.usda.gov) for more information.

#### (12) Cooperative Extension

Local and regional production and marketing information based on university and USDA science is available through a nationwide network of thousands of state, county and regional Extension offices who have experts on agriculture, youth development, leadership development, natural resources, family and consumer sciences, and community and economic development. To find your local office, see the map at [www.nifa.usda.gov/Extension/index.html](http://www.nifa.usda.gov/Extension/index.html) or look in the local government listings in your phone book. These offices collaborate to share information on the web through the interactive web site eXtension ([www.extension.org](http://www.extension.org)), which includes publications, videos, lessons, and “Ask the Experts” on many topics such as farming (including organic), gardening, marketing (including niche meat processing), and community development (including entrepreneurship).