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UC researchers lead USDA-funded study of farm-to-institution programs

*Potentially huge market could spell relief for small and mid-sized farms, improve eating habits of many

For Immediate Release

SANTA CRUZ, CA--Say good-bye to wisecracks about lousy cafeteria food and get ready for more salad bars and fresh produce in schools, universities, and hospitals.

That's the vision behind an ambitious two-year study of the feasibility of "farm-to-institution" programs being launched this month by researchers at the University of California's Santa Cruz and Davis campuses.

"These programs could be a lifeline for small- to mid-scale farmers struggling to stay afloat, and would improve the eating habits of millions of Americans, from young schoolchildren to elderly hospital patients," said project director Patricia Allen, associate director of the UCSC Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems (CASFS).

If institutional food buyers embrace sustainably produced goods, including organic and fair-trade edibles, the environmental gains could be enormous, said Allen. "Due to the size of the institutional food market, farm-to-institution programs could catalyze a fundamental transformation in the way the nation produces and distributes food," she said.

Farm-to-institution programs are sprouting up around the country, and the institutional demand for fresh, sustainably produced food is growing nationwide. The project is the first large-scale assessment of the nation's appetite for food-to-institution programs. It encompasses a national survey of college students' food preferences, a survey of the priorities of institutional food buyers in California, and an evaluation of distribution models that could be developed to get more fresh, locally grown food into institutions, including schools, universities, and hospitals.

Allen will be joined on the project by codirector Shermain Hardesty, Cooperative Extension specialist in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at UC Davis; Jan Perez, associate specialist at CASFS; and Gail Feenstra, food systems analyst, and Jeri Ohmart, food systems program representative, with the UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SAREP). Additionally, staff at the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) will collaborate on the project, including program director Anya Fernald, program manager Kristen Schroer, and Marisol Asselta, coordinator of CAFF's Central Coast "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" campaign.

"Very little is known about the distribution of local produce from small and mid-sized farms to institutions," said Feenstra. "We want to find out what works and share this information with the farmers. They're the ones who are disappearing from the landscape the fastest, and we believe they're the ones best positioned to take advantage of the institutional markets we are targeting."

The project, "Increasing Value-Added Profits for Small and Medium-scale Growers: The Institutional Market," will analyze the feasibility of farm-to-institution models, quantify the demand for such programs, and survey individuals and institutions about their interests and willingness to pay for foods grown in an environmentally and socially sustainable manner on small and medium-sized farms.

"The survey of buyers for food service operations at California's universities and colleges will enable us to assess their produce preferences and purchasing practices," said Hardesty. "If the transaction costs significantly affect their decisions to purchase from small- and medium-sized producers, then we'll need to recommend alternative systems that reduce these transaction costs."

On the farm side, researchers will assess the potential profitability of farm-to-institution programs, explore ways that farmers can tap these markets, and identify mechanisms to ease food distribution so institutions can meet their food demands without having to contract individually with multiple growers.

Americans spent nearly \$5 billion on food expenditures away from home in 2004, and institutions capture a quarter of this market, said Allen. In California, more than 21,000 education and health care institutions provide meals daily.

"The institutional foods market has been largely untapped by small- and mid-sized farmers," said Allen. "If institutional contracts incorporate sustainability criteria, a huge market could be transformed with an incentive-based approach, rather than through regulation." Such criteria could include wage and benefits requirements for food-system workers and reducing the use of toxic pesticides, she added.

The two-year project is being funded by a \$400,000 grant from the National Research Initiative of the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"It's exciting to see the caliber of the two UC programs that are collaborating with CAFF on this project, and it's encouraging that the USDA is supporting this innovative research," noted Fernald.

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A photo of a Farm-to-School event at UC Davis can be downloaded from the web at http://www.ucsc.edu/news_events/press/photos/

*This release is available on the web at: press.ucsc.edu