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Center for Environmental Farming Systems Receives Major Grant to Build Local Food Supply Chains

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The Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS) has been awarded the first year's funding of a five- year, \$3.9 million grant to build and evaluate supply chains for local farmers and fishers to supply large-scale markets in North Carolina. The grant was awarded by the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA).

CEFS will work with existing wholesale distributors and with farmers, fishers, processors and emerging food hubs to address the growing demand for local foods from institutional and retail buyers. The project seeks to create a statewide and national model of local food supply chains that serve large markets and incorporate values of the local foods movement -- sustainability, fair pricing for producers and others in the value chain, and inclusion of medium and small-sized farms.

Lowes Foods and Fort Bragg, as well as US Foods and Foster-Caviness which supply food to Fort Bragg, are major project partners and represent the type of large-scale retail and institutional markets the supply chains will serve.

"We are excited to explore ways that local food supply chains can scale-up to significantly increase consumer access to seasonal and nutritious foods in the state," said Dr. Nancy Creamer, co-director of CEFS at NC State University. "Local food systems have the capacity to grow jobs; strengthen the economy; preserve farms, farmland, fishing communities and working waterfronts; and improve health outcomes, as consumer demand for fresh foods continues to increase."

The project involves research, outreach and academic components and includes a number of partners within North Carolina. One of those partners is "Got to Be NC Agriculture", the statewide marketing program of the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services that has worked since 2005 to increase markets by building consumer recognition of local foods.

The project has four objectives, the first of which is to establish baseline data. In addition to establishing a baseline of local food sales into the two target markets (Lowes Foods and Fort Bragg), CEFS, in partnership with the Sustainable Local Foods Advisory Council and the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, will conduct a statewide infrastructure survey to identify existing facilities that are available or could be repurposed to support local food supply chains for dairy, meat, seafood, and produce.

The second objective is to identify supply chain obstacles and determine the effectiveness of interventions. CEFS will work with N.C. Cooperative Extension Service to provide farmer training, and other partners, for example, the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association and the North Carolina Farm Bureau, to increase the supply of local foods in the state. One goal is to increase the number of growers certified in Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs), which would enable more local fruit and vegetable producers to supply institutional and retail markets.

Another project partner, the N.C. State University Poole College of Management's Supply Chain Resource Cooperative (SCRC) will work with North Carolina Sea Grant and the local seafood educational initiatives (N.C. "Catch" programs), Farmhand Foods, NC Choices, Eastern Carolina Organics, and other supply chain partners to explore local supply chains for seafood, meat, dairy, produce, and value-added food products.

The project will also explore ways to increase opportunities for value-added processing of local products through partnerships with Orange County's Piedmont Food and Agriculture Processing Facility and Buncombe County's Blue Ridge Food Ventures, with assistance from James Beard award-winning chef Andrea Reusing of Lantern Restaurant.

The third project objective addresses purchasing standards that can limit the ability of North Carolina institutions to source local foods. This includes examining grading standards and military contracts regarding food products, among other things, in partnership with North Carolina's Eastern Region Military Growth Task Force working with Marine Corps Installations East (MCIEAST).

The fourth objective of the study addresses the demand side to increase local food sales and improve access to North Carolinians of all income levels. CEFS and its partners in Cooperative Extension, UNC Chapel Hill, its Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, and UNC Wilmington Feast Down East will work with Lowes Foods to explore ways of expanding its "Locally Grown Club," a model that provides community-supported agriculture (CSA)-like boxes of local produce to customers. In addition, CEFS will work with Fort Bragg and its food suppliers to increase local seasonal produce in dining facilities, expand the Officers' Club purchases of North Carolina seafood and increase the amount of local foods available to military families through the commissary.

CEFS and the North Carolina Cooperative Extension System are excited about the goals of this project according to Dr. John O'Sullivan, co-director of CEFS from NC A&T State University. "It will bring resources to help producers make important market connections, creating jobs and enhancing farm viability. It will also engage students at both NC A&T SU and NC State in facilitating market-based changes, giving them important lessons and real world connections and experiences."

The Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS) is a partnership of North Carolina State University, North Carolina A&T State University, and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. CEFS' mission is to develop and promote food and farming systems that protect the environment, strengthen local communities, and provide economic opportunities in North Carolina and beyond. For more information, please visit www.cefs.ncsu.edu.