

2007 Farm Bill Can Enhance Hunger and Nutrition Programs

By New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Charles M. Kuperus

Even with our nation's immense wealth and the array of agriculture across its landscape, hunger remains a stubborn problem for many Americans.

By USDA estimates, more than 12 million children are "food insecure," meaning it is likely they will go to bed hungry tonight.

Often, the word "hunger" implies solely a lack of access to food. But it also can describe diets that lack the appropriate nutritional content. In America, we have both, and a better job must be done in addressing these issues, with agriculture at the heart of that effort.

As Congress prepares to craft a new Farm Bill, it's worthwhile to have a discussion of the issues involved in preventing hunger and educating people about better nutrition. New Jersey is committed to working with other states to help shape a Farm Bill that is relevant to all types of farming operations – small and large, those near population centers and those in more rural settings – and which includes flexible programs to provide for the feeding operations and nutrition education programs inexorably connected to agriculture.

Because we have compulsory education, schools are a great starting point for addressing both the lack of food and the need for a better understanding of what constitutes good nutrition. By focusing on the accessibility and quality of foods made available in schools, as well as educating students (and by extension their parents) about good nutrition, both sides of the nutrition issue can be impacted by action through our schools.

Over the past generation or two, however, schools began to rely less on locally grown, fresh foods in their cafeterias, snack bars and vending machines and opted for more processed foods.

Fortunately, that trend is reversing, and the emphasis is once again on fresh fruits, vegetables and other products grown and made closer to the schools, if not on the school grounds themselves in gardens tended by the students.

The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 included \$50 million per year to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables through the Department of Defense (DOD) for use in school meals. Expanding that program and increasing its funding will enable schools in every state to obtain fresh fruits and vegetables, encourage students to eat more fresh produce and strengthen local community-based food systems.

In New Jersey, we have adopted the most comprehensive school nutrition standards in the nation, which limit or eliminate high-fat and sugar-laden snacks, among other steps. Though our schools have until September 2007 to comply with the standards, nearly 60 percent already have. These rules, along with increased nutrition education about the benefits of eating more fresh fruits and vegetables, should result in more purchases of fresh, locally produced agricultural products.

Besides schools, community feeding programs can play a critical role in reducing hunger and increasing nutritional value.

While feeding programs often receive a significant amount of support, both in public dollars and donations from contributors, those funds in the past have often been less than what was needed to ensure the organizations could distribute adequate amounts of food.

Part of that problem has been the lack of a coordinated effort to buy more fresh and nutrient-dense foods in a local first, regional second, national/international third hierarchy. Because of that, dollars that could have gone for food were instead eaten up in transportation costs. These dollars lost to “food miles” can be better spent buying more food from local sources.

The Hunger Initiative launched by Governor Corzine last year and administered through the Department already calls for the local-first method of food purchases meeting national dietary guidelines and will continue to do so to ensure that the maximum amount of dollars go to nutritious food and not transportation costs.

The USDA already has shown good progress in many of these areas. Their listening session at Battery Park, New York, signaled their view that nutrition and hunger programs share an equal stage with other farm and agricultural issues that must be addressed through national policy.

Along with strategic increases in the federal food programs, a “buy local first” approach to feeding operations, and adherence to USDA dietary guidelines, other hunger and nutrition issues that should receive attention in the Farm Bill debate include:

- **Expanded Support of Farm-to-School Initiatives** – Pre-approve suppliers and products that both comply with federal procurement regulations and pass a comprehensive competitive evaluation.
- **Increase Emergency Feeding Funding** – Additional funding for food purchases would increase the selection of nutrient dense foods – more fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grain cereals, pastas and lean protein items made available to food insecure households consistent with the USDA’s Food Guide Pyramid.
- **Enhance Technology** – Provide financial support for development of shared electronic platforms. Technology improves the efficiency of communication and customer service. Web-based systems enhance food accessibility, affordability; improve nutrition, while also expanding consumption and sales of local grown produce.

With the Farm Bill discussion upon us, this is the time to take a long, hard look at our hunger and nutrition programs and modify them to prepare for the future. Focusing on local purchases and emphasizing fresh, nutritious food will benefit both our school children and the hungry.

