

## Things to Consider When Working with Farmers\*

**Farmers are out standing in their fields - literally.** Particularly during the summer months, many farmers are in their fields or marketing their crops from sun up to sun down. You may want to try calling early in the morning, or later in the evening.

**Crops and their availability differ throughout the state.** Ask farmers when their crops are in season, and what amounts might be available to sell to schools. When considering a new market, such as sales to schools, farmers may want to start with one or two crops to see how the system works.

**Some farmers have a great deal of experience working directly with prospective buyers – others have very limited experience.** Farmers who sell at farmers' markets, restaurants and other established marketing outlets may be more likely to work within your specifications and restraints. However, these type farmers tend to produce on a small, labor intensive scale and may not be able to initially meet much more additional demand. Smaller operations often require prices higher than large farms, because they lack economies of scale.

**Some farmers sell most or all of their products through brokers or on contract.** These are normally large farms which produce high volumes of a few specific crops. These farmers, or their brokers, may be more inclined to work with larger school districts or cooperatives of districts, in order to move enough of their product(s). Due to their economies of scale, they may also be more able to accept lower prices paid by middlemen such as produce distributors who sell to schools.

**Produce vendors who currently deliver your fresh fruits and vegetables might be interested in sourcing locally grown items.** Some may already be doing this, but the challenge for distributors is to effectively notify you when this is happening, preferably with enough lead time to allow some related educational outreach in the classroom or cafeteria. Let them know if you need more information about their sources and/or if you need earlier notice when local items are coming.

**Farmers do not generally deliver their product to markets on a daily basis.** Farmers are more inclined to deliver to a central warehouse once or twice a week than to multiple schools every day. They sometimes have limited transportation and will look for the most efficient way to deliver their products.

**Encourage farmers to work through a cooperative or other farm organization that can act on their behalf.** A co-op or similar organization could deliver product for all farmers, handle paperwork for its members, and allow you to work with one person instead of a number of individual farmers. Working with a cooperative would simplify the procurement process for both you and the individual farmers. However, there are many examples where schools purchase directly from multiple farmers or vendors and are able to develop an efficient procurement process.

**Farmers ' costs are upfront – they don 't receive payment for their crops until after the ground has been prepared, the crop has been planted, and the harvest has been brought to market.** Because of this, prompt payment is appreciated. Most farmers will prefer payment within 15 -30 days, but some will accept payment up to 60 days after the sale.

**Most experienced growers are familiar with and adhere to food safety regulations.** Farmers who are selling their products through existing marketing and distribution outlets are already required to follow all pertinent rules and regulations. Take the time to examine their product and the truck in which it is delivered. If you have any concerns, make them known. You might also consider asking about an on-farm visit, as well.

**Look for those growers who show a real willingness to work with you – and be willing to work with them.** The school food procurement system does not naturally lend itself to buying direct from farmers. In developing a procurement system that works for farmers and schools, both sides will have issues and concerns that deserve consideration and discussion.

**Get Support from Others.** The school food service director need not try to implement a farm-to-school program alone. Farm-to-school programs can be an opportunity for the various stakeholders in the school system (food service, teachers, school staff, administrators, parents, students etc.) to work together toward the common goals of improving school meals. A good strategy is to have an organizing meeting to present your ideas and to allow others to express theirs.

**Who to involve from the school.** These folks might be interested in taking part in an organizing meeting: School Food Service Staff, Nutritionist, Principals, Teachers, School Nurse, Students, Parents and PTA Members, School Board Members.

**Others to involve in the community:**

County health and nutrition staff; county extension agents; county conservation district officers; county agriculture commissioner; staff from local congressional and state representative offices, local government officials, chamber of commerce, farm and sustainable agriculture organizations, environmental groups, anti-hunger and food security organizations

**Who to involve in the state:**

Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry; Oklahoma State Departments of Education and Health; Oklahoma Food Policy Council; Kerr Center; Oklahoma Food Cooperative

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\* This handout was adapted by Kerr Center staff from the publication, "Sourcing Food from Local Farmers," Vermont FEED (Food Education Every Day!). To learn about Vermont FEED's innovative farm-to-school approaches and to view or download their helpful resources, go to their website, [www.vtfeed.org](http://www.vtfeed.org).