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Wolf Administration Highlights Pennsylvania's Farm to School Success, Announce Next Steps to Ensure Ag Workforce Security

Mechanicsburg, PA – At Hill Top Academy in Mechanicsburg today, Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding was joined by Vonda Ramp, Pennsylvania's Director of Childhood Nutrition Programs, today where he revealed that over the past three years, Pennsylvania schools offering farm to school programming increased by more than 137 percent since last surveyed.

According to recently released Farm to School Census data by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Pennsylvania schools are increasingly offering programs that grow agricultural awareness and provide locally produced foods in schools that combat food access issues and increase nutrition.

"Pennsylvania's farm to school programs provide nearly one million Pennsylvania kids with access fresh, healthy produce and simultaneously spark an interest in agriculture," said Redding. "Empowering students to know where their food comes from is one of the most powerful tools we can provide to today's youth."

Recent census data includes the following [Pennsylvania highlights](#):

- 56.2% of programs surveyed have been in operation for less than three years, which is an increase of 137.6% from the prior survey;
- Nearly 81% of programs are serving local, farm fresh food through the program, compared to the national average of 76% serving local food;
- 27% of programs have edible gardens that serve as an extension to classroom learning;
- 73% of programs serve local milk weekly;
- Nearly one million Pennsylvania students are impacted by these farm to school programs.

"Schools across the commonwealth are producing opportunities to help students explore and experience the many ways the agriculture industry impacts all of our lives," said Ramp. "At the center of this important work is farm to school programming, which also creates connections and builds pathways to a variety of rewarding careers."

In July 2019, [Governor Tom Wolf signed](#) into law the first-ever Pennsylvania Farm Bill which included an annual investment of \$500,000 into [PA Farm to School grant projects](#). Since becoming law, the PA Farm to School grant program has funded 84 projects across the commonwealth and the third \$500,000 program is currently accepting [applications](#) until October 1, 2021.

Farm to school programming is critical to improving access to healthy, local foods and increasing agriculture education opportunities for pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. Increased

early agriculture education opportunities are key to developing a new generation to support Pennsylvania's agriculture workforce, which is facing substantial vacancies over the coming years resulting from retirements as well as new opportunities that are a result of increased innovation.

"The dollars we've invested in farm to school projects across the commonwealth are a direct investment in both the health and wellness of children and the security of agriculture's workforce, and therefore food, in the future," said Redding. "Furthering our commitment to the future of agriculture, we've hired the first-ever full-time executive director for the Commission for Agriculture Education Excellence. We can't ensure a new generation to take on this responsibility without an active, engaged pursuit."

Stephon Fitzpatrick was hired this month to support a secure future for Pennsylvania agriculture by serving as executive director of the Pennsylvania Commission for Agriculture Education Excellence, which reports jointly to the Pennsylvania Departments of Agriculture and Education. Fitzpatrick comes to the commission with more than 17 years of experience working within different sectors of the agriculture industry, including the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture as a National 1890 Scholar, FFA, Minorities in Agriculture Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS), World Food Prize, National Association of Agriculture Educators, and work with Maryland FFA and the Maryland Ag Teachers Association. As a non-traditional agriculture student, through his work as the former Coordinator for Recruitment, Retention & Experiential Learning for the School of Agriculture and Natural Sciences at UMES, Fitzpatrick has spent the last several years providing leadership and professional development opportunities for students majoring in more than 30 different agriculture majors.

"I look forward to establishing seamless relationships with Pennsylvania's agriculture educators, stakeholders, industry professionals, community partners, and workforce sectors to address both agriculture education needs and the gaps in the industry's workforce," said Fitzpatrick. "Agriculture is a people business. We must ensure that awareness, financial support, and educational literacy on ag education is available for everyone regardless of zip code, nationality, skin color, sexual identity, or religion."

Pennsylvania agriculture is a \$132.5 billion industry that employs more than 593,000 jobs paying wages of nearly \$33 billion. To ensure the future availability, affordability, and accessibility of food for the world, the Wolf Administration has prioritized investments to grow a new generation of agriculturalists.

For more information about the Pennsylvania Farm Bill and investments to support Pennsylvania agriculture, visit agriculture.pa.gov/pafarmbill.

Note: Photo and video from this event will be available at pacast.com.

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