



Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan talks with Director John Waite of the Franklin County Community Development Corp. Tuesday as she visits Greenfield

‘Heart of local food movement’

Deputy Ag. Sec. Kathleen Merrigan visits her hometown and talks about new initiatives for small farms

By **RICHIE DAVIS** Recorder Staff

GREENFIELD — U.S. Deputy Agriculture Secretary Kathleen Merrigan brought her “Know your farmer, know your food” campaign to town Tuesday, and it turned out that many people in the Greenfield Community College audience knew her.

That’s because Merrigan grew up on Lincoln Street, next to a gardening neighbor’s farm stand that gave way to commercial development. But her message to students, and visiting advocates of local agriculture was upbeat, calling this “the heart of a lot of the local food movement” that has been helped by USDA programs to strengthen the connection between farmers and consumers.

“It was part of the fabric of this valley,” as the 51-year-old agriculture official remembers growing up here. The 1978 Greenfield High School graduate, who took her first college class at GCC, recalled, “We lost a lot of those farms, and we’re trying to rebuild that.”

After the GCC presentation, at which the USDA’s \$250,000 “Farm to Institution New England initiative” got a boost of an additional \$200,000 from the John Merck Initiative, Merrigan got to see peppers being chopped for freezing as part of that initiative at the Western Massachusetts Food Processing Center.

The initiative is doing so well, said Glenn Brunetti of Chartwell’s Food Service, that he was able to sell 5,200 pounds of chopped, frozen broccoli, cauliflower and pepper strips a couple of weeks ago to 100 schools around the region.

“We could have sent out twice as much as that,” he said, but that was all that was available from Pioneer Valley Growers Association and five other farms participating. His comment echoed one Merrigan made earlier: “There’s a fervor now for knowing your farmer.”



The USDA's new dietary guidelines encourages people to eat half a plate of fruits and vegetables, but Merrigan said, "The reality is that if everyone in America ate half a plate of foods and vegetables, we'd be importing most of that. We don't have that capacity. Isn't that a great opportunity for small-scale growers in highly lucrative, high value crops — fruits and vegetables — to reclaim land, both in urban and rural areas?"

In fact, much of the land where fall vegetables are being grown for the Food to Institution program was formerly used for tobacco, according to project Coordinator Jill Fitzsimmons.

The biggest challenge to American agriculture, Merrigan told the GCC gathering, is the age of farmers," with the average farmer now 59 and 30 percent of farmers over age 65 and Agriculture Secretary Thomas Vilsak saying that 100,000 new farmers are needed every year.

Under Vilsak's and Merrigan's watch, USDA has invested in programs like \$13 million worth of cost-sharing last year for hoop-houses to extend the growing season for small farmers, as well as innovative programs like a mobile poultry slaughterhouse for Massachusetts — plus building support with the Obama administration for school nutrition initiatives and for farm-to-school linkages.

Given federal budget cuts that are looming, Merrigan said, "It's a time when we have to be very strategic about our priorities, and there's no way we're going to back down from trying to find the assistance we need for beginning farmers. It's the future; we have no choice. I think that visionary leaders in agriculture understand that."

Some programs may have to "hibernate" because of those cuts, Merrigan said, until the economy begins to recover. And yet, she said, she sees programs having multiple purposes.

"If I get people to invest in local agriculture, and that money stays in the local economy and has a multiplier effect, farmers are making more money, the money's being spent in town, so Wilson's stays viable and the People's Pint is operational."

That translates to creating jobs and more viable rural communities.

"It's looking beyond putting food on the plate and understanding the depth of the investment. ... This is old news in western Mass. You guys are the kind of pictureperfect area in terms of the impulse to do these things."

Like the "organic" section in the 2008 Farm Authorization Bill, Merrigan said she's interested in one Congressional proposal for a "Local" title in the upcoming 2012 Farm Bill.

"Now local has really come to that threshold," she said. "But whether there's a local foods title in the new farm bill, we're going to keep on this track, because we think it's an important one."

Asked about the balance between tough new food safety rules being administered by the federal Food and Drug Administration and the difficulties for small-scale farmers to meet those requirements, she said, "We're the USDA; our job is to advocate for farmers, and to make sure that everyone reaches the high levels of food safety that the president wants and that the Food Safety Modernization Act calls for, but to understand there may be different ways of getting there that might account for size and the diversity of operations."

A proposed National Animal Identification System was "very seriously amended," she said, after considerable criticism from small farmers who found it would be nightmarish to try to implement.



U.S. Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan speaks at Greenfield Community College Tuesday.

As she headed to tour the Wells Street food processing facility, Merrigan said she plans to "showcase" the Farm to Institution New England initiative in her talks around the country.

"This sounds great. It really will help farmers extend their season and increase their sales, and it's connected to the schools, so it seems perfect."

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