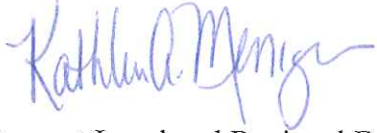




THE DEPUTY SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE
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DATE: March 18, 2011
FROM: USDA Deputy Secretary Kathleen A. Merrigan 
SUBJECT: Harnessing USDA Forest Service Programs to Support Local and Regional Food Systems

When people think about the Department of Agriculture (USDA) they usually think of the Farm Service Agency loan specialist helping a farmer finance a new tractor, the Extension agent showing a new rancher what to look for in cattle, or the Rural Development State Director joining with a town to build a new community kitchen. But few would realize our largest agency is not directly responsible for our farms, but rather our forests.

The Forest Service manages 193 million acres of forests and rangelands, and helps States, Tribes, and communities manage an additional 500 million acres – together about 30% of the United States! Through its work in managing and protecting these lands the Forest Service plays a critical, even if often overlooked, role in local and regional food systems.

Our forests are home to a wide range of healthy and delicious foods. Forests provide mushrooms, berries, other “special forest products”, and habitat for wildlife and fish. They also sustain forage to feed cattle, sheep, and other livestock. For many citizens, farmers, ranchers, and woodland owners, including American Indians and Alaska Natives, these high value foods and forages help sustain businesses, health and well-being, cultural and family traditions, and provide opportunities for recreation. In addition, they are an important source of clean air, water, soil, and pollinators that is the foundation of many local and regional food systems. 80% of the water used in irrigation originates in our forests before it travels to lakes, rivers, irrigation channels, and agricultural land.

For States, Tribes, businesses, communities, organizations, and individual citizens interested in using their forests as a source of local and regional food production the Forest Service has a number of useful programs, including:

USDA National Agroforestry Center

Trees have a job to do. Put them to "work" on your land and watch them do important tasks like improve water quality, control soil erosion, increase agricultural production, and provide wildlife habitat. That is the idea behind the *Working Trees* concept developed by Forest Service employee Jerry Bratton (retired): combining agriculture and forestry practices can yield environmental, economic, and social benefits.

The USDA National Agroforestry Center (NAC), jointly sponsored by the Forest Service and

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, was established 18 years ago to do just that. The Center's mission is to accelerate the application of agroforestry through a national network of partners. NAC develops and delivers the science, tools, and training that help landowners and natural resource professionals design, plan, and apply agroforestry practices.

Through the Conservation Buffers Guide (<http://www.unl.edu/nac/bufferguidelines/index.html>), which lists more than 80 science-based guidelines, the Center is providing a tool that natural resource professionals can use to help landowners design conservation buffers that support food production and improve the environment by protecting water quality, preventing soil erosion, conserving energy, enhancing wildlife habitat, controlling pests naturally, and increasing natural diversity within the farm operation. NAC also supports local and regional food systems by providing information that helps farmers, ranchers and forest owners implement practices such as:

- **Alley cropping**, which integrates annual crops (e.g., vegetables) with trees/shrubs that may include high-value nuts (e.g., black walnuts and chestnuts).
- **Forest farming**, with a focus on best management practices to support the sustainable production and harvest of edible nontimber forest products (e.g., ginseng, ramps, and mushrooms) by private landowners, especially small and limited resource landowners.
- **Silvopasture systems** that integrate tree, forage, and livestock components in order to enhance and diversify production, providing landowners with annual and longer-term income streams.
- **Windbreaks** that provide wind protection needed to enhance the yield and quality of many vegetable and fruit crops, as well as buffering organic production fields from adjacent field activities, such as pesticide and fertilizer applications.

How can the Center help you? A north-central Illinois farm couple started out just looking to keep a perennial forest herb from crowding out other wildflowers on their 26-acre woodlands. But when they contacted Dr. Jim Chamberlain at the Southern Research Station for advice, they found out they could harvest ramps, also called wild onions, for income as part of their management plan to encourage other native woodland plants. In the first year they harvested nearly 4,000 pounds of ramps and several pounds of seeds, and within three years the native ramps were providing almost 70 percent of their total farm income. The couple washes most of the ramps themselves, but now also employs local workers to help with the harvest.

For more information about NAC and their resources, visit <http://www.unl.edu/nac>.

Forest Legacy Program

The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) helps protect in perpetuity environmentally-important forest areas threatened by conversion. FLP projects protect forests that may support local and regional food systems by increasing soil and water stability for farming and livestock operations or providing habitat for pollinators and game species. For more information about this program, visit <http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/coop/programs/loa/flp.shtml>.

In Maine, the Mount Blue State Park/Tumbledown Forest Legacy Project includes a Conservation Easement that allows maple sugaring as a forest-related business. Thanks to the project's support from the Forest Service, the Maine Bureau of Parks & Land was able to work with the landowner to

amend the forest management plan on the property to allow the creation of a maple sugaring operation. Last year, the property produced nearly 1,100 gallons of delicious Maine maple syrup.

Forest Stewardship Program

The Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) encourages long-term stewardship of private forest lands through grants to State forestry agencies. The planning assistance offered through the FSP may also provide landowners with greater access to other USDA conservation programs.

Privately-managed forests on many Pacific Islands have traditionally been diverse agroforests, valued for their fruit, nuts, wood products, fiber, and medicinal plants. In recent decades, changing diets on the island have resulted in many residents not getting enough Vitamin A and C. An FSP grant to the State forestry agency on Pohnpei Island is helping raise awareness of the nutritional value of traditional foods found in the forest and increase production of these crops. The project has changed attitudes about local foods, improved nutrition, and motivated more people to engage in agroforestry. For more information about this program, visit:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/coop/programs/loa/fsp.shtml>.

Open Space

The Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program (CFP) helps communities acquire publically accessible forest land that provides environmental and social benefits. Through CFP, the Forest Service is authorized to provide financial assistance grants to local government, Tribal governments, and nonprofit entities to establish community forests that provide continuing and accessible community benefits.

This new program can indirectly support local or regional food systems through land acquisition. Twenty-five percent of forest land acquired under the program may be managed in a nonforest compatible use. For example, an urban forest parcel could have community garden plots or urban orchards as a nonforest compatible use. For more information about this program, visit

<http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/coop/programs/loa/cfp.shtml>.

Special Forest Products

Many food items, such as mushrooms, fruits and berries, roots, herbs, and other “special forest products” may be gathered, within the limitations of ecosystem sustainability, from National Forest System (NFS) lands for people’s economic, social, and cultural well-being. To learn what products may be available, and their allowable harvesting practices, contact your local Forest Service office for assistance. The office locations are available at <http://www.fs.fed.us>.

Fish and Wildlife Programs

Restoring and enhancing wildlife habitat helps ensure the availability of game species, an important food source for many citizens. Each year the Forest Service completes more than 2,000 habitat projects through its Fish and Wildlife programs, often in partnership with conservation organizations (e.g., Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the National Wild Turkey Federation),

State fish and wildlife agencies, local hunting and fishing groups, and community youth groups.

National Forest System lands provide diverse wildlife habitat and excellent hunting and fishing opportunities, and provide significant amounts of wild-grown meat to hunters and fishers. A report developed independently by the American Sportfishing Association and Southwick Associates quantified the economic effects of trips to NFS lands at \$894 million by hunters and \$592 million by anglers annually within 50 miles of their fishing holes on NFS lands. These expenditures supported 14,500 jobs and stimulated \$66 million in Federal income tax receipts. For information about these programs, visit <http://www.fs.fed.us/biology/>.

Alaska Region Subsistence Program

Subsistence is a way of life in Alaska. Many Alaskans use wild plants and animals, especially fish, to put food on the table. This reliance on nutritious wild foods, called "subsistence," is critical in rural areas where store-bought food may be unavailable or unaffordable. For Alaska Natives in particular, gathering, preparing, and sharing wild foods are integral to the history, culture, and health of individuals and communities. The Forest Service and other Federal agencies share responsibility for managing subsistence fishing and hunting on Federal lands and waters throughout Alaska (including the Chugach and Tongass National Forests). For more information about this program, scroll down to "Subsistence" at

http://www.fs.fed.us/r10/ro/ak_overview/natural_resources/natural_resources.shtml#WFEWS.

Watershed Management Programs

Watershed Management programs help forests supply many critical ecosystem services, including water supplies for agricultural uses. The Forest Service administers over 3,000 Special Use Permits, governing the withdrawal of water from NFS lands by agricultural sources. In particular, water withdrawals from NFS lands by agricultural producers in the States of California, Colorado and Idaho account for nearly 80 percent of all water extractions in the Western U.S. For more information about these programs, visit <http://www.fs.fed.us/biology/watershed/index.html>.

Conservation Education Program - Green Schools!

The Conservation Education program helps people of all ages understand and appreciate our country's natural resources and learn how to conserve those resources for future generations. Through structured educational experiences and activities targeted to varying age groups and populations, conservation education enables people to realize how natural resources and ecosystems affect each other and how resources can be used wisely. Through conservation education, people develop the critical thinking skills they need to understand the complexities of ecological problems, and encourages people to conserve natural resources and use them in a responsible manner by making informed resource decisions. Learn more at <http://fs.usda.gov/conservationeducation>.

Through Conservation Education, the Forest Service provides support to programs such as Green Schools! This project combines environmental education, service learning, and leadership opportunities for students to help turn their school into a model sustainable school. The Elsie Whitlow Stokes Public Charter School is one of six schools in Washington D.C. that received

support for a year-long process to develop and implement an action plan to green up their school. In addition to increasing recycling and energy and water conservation, they were able to establish a school garden and work with chefs to connect the garden to the table. And, this month they became the first school in D.C. to setup a salad bar for students and receive the USDA HealthierUS Schools Gold Award for promoting a healthier school environment.

Botany Program - Pollinators Initiative

Pollinators—animals that assist plants, such as bees and birds—are critical to agriculture. One in every three mouthfuls of food is the result of the successful pollination of a flower by an animal pollinator. In the United States alone, the pollination of agricultural crops is valued at \$10 billion annually. To help our wild friends, the Botany Program (<http://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/pollinators>) has an initiative that has supported the installation of nearly 100 pollinator gardens at Forest Service buildings, public parks, and local schools. Many gardens have interpretive panels explaining the importance of pollinators to the food consumed by people and wildlife.

The Forest Service has an extensive Web site dealing with pollination, including teaching materials and activities for teachers and children. The Web site provides visitors with pollinator friendly practices they may incorporate on their property, like using native plants and how to plant a diversity of flowering plants so that pollen and nectar are available throughout the entire growing season. They have also developed a distance learning program called Pollinator LIVE (<http://pollinatorlive.pwnet.org/index.php>) that reaches communities and schools across the country and supports the development of gardens that provide pollinator habitat and produce food.

Urban and Community Forestry Program and Baltimore Ecosystem Study

The Urban and Community Forestry (UCF) program provides a comprehensive approach to protecting urban trees and forests through its primary partner the State forestry agencies and other national, regional and local partners. UCF projects can support local food systems by helping communities to establish fruit and nut-bearing trees and increasing awareness of the opportunities for food production from urban trees.

The UCF program has also been active in urban agriculture tree planting initiatives across the country, in cities large and small, from Philadelphia PA, to Moab UT, to Los Angeles CA, to the U.S. affiliated Pacific Island nations. State and nonprofit partners in Los Angeles have been working with local neighborhoods to support the planting of fruit trees as a way to overcome resistance to tree planting and create new sources of local, fresh fruits. For more information about this program, visit <http://www.fs.fed.us/ucf>.

The Forest Service's Northern Research Station is a major partner in the Baltimore Ecosystem Study. Baltimore, Maryland, recently established urban agriculture as a desired land use in the city's sustainability plan. Station staff worked with the city to identify opportunities for revitalized landscapes, including city-owned vacant lands that could be bundled to lease for agriculture production, as well as park land that could be converted to food uses, such as orchards and grain production to supply local food businesses.

Job Corps Civilian Conservation Centers

The Forest Service's 28 Civilian Conservation Centers (JCCCC), managed in cooperation with the Department of Labor (DOL), provide voluntary programs of work-based learning to underserved youth. JCCCCs, which are located in rural communities, have embraced the potential of local and regional food systems both in terms of the food they serve to students and in the training provided in the Culinary Arts career technical training program. This initiative strengthens connections between our students and the local agricultural community, and gives students an advantage in competing for good jobs in today's restaurant environment.

Most recently, JCCCCs have expanded culinary training to focus not only on food preparation but also menu planning and making healthy choices for our bodies and the environment. As part of the initiative, the Forest Service worked with DOL and the National Job Corps Association to develop the Job Corps' Top Chefs: Creating Healthy and Nutritious Food Services professional development training course last October. The course culminated in a "Top Chef" style competition using local, sustainable ingredients that took place in the USDA cafeteria.

In addition, all 28 Forest Service JCCCCs have created food gardens as part of the People's Garden initiative. Raising their own garden has helped JCCCC students understand how hard it is to produce food, but also how much fun it can be. And with the fruits and vegetables grown, they further the JCCCCs' ability to provide healthy, local produce to students and the local community and teach our students to be more nutritious eaters.