



August 2024

E-Harvest Newsletter

A Message from Commissioner Miller

Howdy Neighbors! Welcome to Your E-Harvest Newsletter.



Soon, Texas children will return to the classroom with the renewed enthusiasm that comes from a summertime break. I encourage students to enjoy the benefits of school meals and eat in the cafeteria during the 2024-2025 school year. School lunch and school breakfast offer balanced nutrition and school nutrition teams work hard to provide local food options when possible. Many of them use my Farm Fresh Network and its 200-plus members to source local foods from nearby agricultural producers. Also, now is the time to contact the school to get a household application for free and reduced-price meals. Remember, students who are eligible for reduced-price meals can eat breakfast-free in the upcoming school year. Contact the school nutrition team to learn more about the advantages of eating at school and what local produce they plan to serve this year.

Sid Miller

Texas Agriculture Commissioner

Farm Fresh Schools

Harvest of the Month Recipes

Red and yellow bell peppers shine as August's Harvest of the Month. Use the Farm Fresh Network map on [SquareMeals.org](https://www.squaremeals.org) to find producers to meet your local pepper needs.

Use this creative [Pepper Slaw](#) recipe from [TheLunchBox.org](https://www.thelunchbox.org) to introduce your students to the versatility of bell peppers.



September Harvest of the Month: watermelon

Funding Opportunities

Texas Farm Bureau's [Learning from the Ground up Garden Grant](#) provides certified PK-12 teachers, PTAs, and certain Texas AgriLife Extension Agents with \$500 to start or expand a garden project with the goal of teaching students about food production. Applications are due **September 23, 2024**.

Learning Opportunities

Kitchen Scrap Gardening

[KidsGardening.org](https://www.kidsgardening.org) shares tips on growing new plants from kitchen scraps. Use seeds from lemons, strawberries, tomatoes, or cucumbers to start new plants. Or use potatoes or sweet potatoes to grow new plants. Find more suggestions on their [Kitchen Scrap Gardening](#) page.

Garden Clubs

Find inspiration from one of Texas's many dedicated Farm to School districts. Laredo ISD has run an [elementary garden club](#) for many years. The goal is to teach students about where their food comes from through hands-on experience.

No Local Food for Schools Office Hours in August

There will be no LFS office hours for the month of August. Please contact localfoodgrant@texasagriculture.gov for any questions. To view recorded sessions and slides from previous office hours, please visit the [LFS webpage](#).

Farm Fresh Sharing

Farm Fresh Sharing spotlights Contracting Entities (CEs) from Texas and across the country who take part in farm to school activities. They answer questions about Farm Fresh programming and share success stories. If you are interested in being featured, please fill out this [survey](#).

This month, Manor ISD takes the spotlight. As the Child Nutrition Director for Manor ISD, Ryan Cengel makes Farm to School a priority. This dedication shows in meal trays, Farm Fresh nutrition education, and Ryan's willingness to share best practices and successes.



Q: How often do you serve local foods in your cafeterias?

A: Manor ISD serves products made, raised and/or grown in Texas every day. We strive to provide our students with the best quality ingredients and many of those are from the great state of Texas.

Q: Have you noticed an increase in meal participation and higher opinions about school meals since you began serving local foods?

A: We have gotten a lot of positive feedback from our students, staff, and parents about our efforts to serve more local products. There are specific products that we serve that certainly help to increase our meal participation rates including Texas grown watermelon, strawberries, and chicken from Greener Pastures Farm.

Q: What inspired you to start Farm Fresh Programming? What motivates you to continue and expand your current Farm Fresh efforts?

A: We feel that it is important to support the local economy by purchasing from local farms and businesses with our procurement practices. Why purchase fruits and vegetables from all over the country when most of those products can often be found right here in Texas?

Q: Are you able to support other districts with implementation of Farm Fresh Programming?

A: Yes, we work with many local districts to share best practices so that students in other districts can be served the same quality products that we serve to the students in Manor ISD. We are not in competition with each other so why not work together to make sure the children all over the state benefit from our efforts? We are always willing to share best practices, ideas, and recipes with other districts.

Q: A frequent reason for not using local producers is the procurement process. What would you say to other CEs who are afraid to make mistakes in procurement? What resources would you recommend for them to be more comfortable with local food procurement?

A: I would reach out to your regional education service center as well as other districts that are already procuring local products. There are also many nonprofits that work on local purchasing efforts like the Sustainable Food Center in Austin, which has a farm to school learning collaborative that includes many districts in Central Texas.

Q: Are any of your local producers a part of the Farm Fresh Network?

A: Yes, we work with multiple producers that are part of the Farm Fresh Network including Greener Pastures Farm in Elgin, True Harvest Farm in Belton, and Alpha Foods in Waller.

Q: Do you have a specific resource to find producers in your area? Do you use TDA's mapping tool on SquareMeals?

A: The mapping tool is very useful as is going to your local farmers market and speaking with farmers to see what they have available and if they are interested in selling to school districts.

Q: What is your students' favorite local product that is part of a menu item?

A: Our students love Texas grown watermelon, strawberries, oranges, and apples. They are also particularly fond of chicken wings from Greener Pastures Farm.

Q: How do you promote the local products you use?



A: We promote the local products that we serve with signage on our serving lines and through social media on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

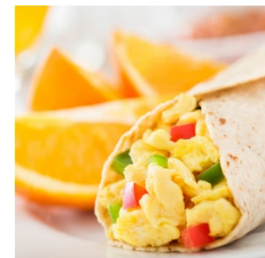
We do many educational sessions on the process of food going from farm to table. We will teach the students usually in PE and then do an activity that corresponds.

Q: What advice would you give a CE trying to decide if/how to participate in Farm Fresh programming?

A: I would recommend reaching out to other school districts that are already doing Farm Fresh programming and see if they would be willing to share best practices. Additionally, I would reach out to your regional education service center and visit the Texas Farm Fresh page on squaremeals.com.

Farm Fresh Early Care Finding New Recipes

Everyone loves a breakfast taco and your little ones will be no exception when they try this [Confetti Egg Taco](#). Source the bell peppers locally to include August's Harvest of the Month.



Learning Opportunities

The National Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Sponsors Association offers a continuing education summit from August 12 to **August 22**. On Wednesday, **August 21** at **11:10 a.m. CDT**, they are presenting a class called The Joys of the Garden Classroom. Recordings of the courses will be available after the summit ends.

Farm Fresh Producer Farm to School Opportunities

Farm Fresh Network Update Request

If you are currently registered in TDA's [Farm Fresh Network](#), please take a moment to review and update your information. Schools are reaching out now, and we want to ensure they have the correct contact information. *If you need to make changes to your FFN information or have questions about your membership, please contact farmfresh@texasagriculture.gov.*

Additional Questions or Concerns? Please contact the Farm Fresh Initiative Team at farmfresh@texasagriculture.gov.

Farm Fresh Photo Library

TDA is undertaking a grassroots effort to increase our photo library. To showcase Texas farmers, ranchers, and producers, a form has been created to collect photo submissions from Farm Fresh participants willing to share. Find the form [here](#).

Farm Fresh Families

Back to School

August is back-to-school month for most Texas schools. This is the time to ramp up your support of Farm Fresh activities in your schools and early care centers. You can do this by encouraging your children to eat school meals and paying attention to the menus sent out by their Child Nutrition providers. Ask them what they ate at school today and if they know if anything was purchased locally or grown in the school garden. If you are able, join your student at lunch or breakfast one day to encourage the nutrition team. Connect with the Child Nutrition department to find out what else you can do to support their Farm to School efforts. Feedback from families gives them the leverage they need to increase their efforts to serve fresh foods. Family volunteers give them the help they need to make things happen.

Farm Fresh Back to Basics

What is the Farm Fresh Challenge?

Each October, TDA challenges Child Nutrition Program (CNP) operators to **Eat Local** by serving local foods for meals, **Teach Local** by including agriculture and nutrition education in classrooms or during special events, and **Be Social** by sharing their efforts on social media.

Awards can be earned by completing requirements to reach one of three tiers for recognition: Prime Participant (beginner level), Best of the Bunch (intermediate), and Cream of the Crop (veteran Farm Fresh Challenge participants). Cream of the Crop has been added to capture the CNP operators who go above and beyond each year. Requirements to achieve

this tier are geared toward more experienced CNPs. Find the parameters for each tier of recognition at SquareMeals.org/FarmFreshChallenge.

New tools have been added to SquareMeals this year to assist with reaching whichever tier CNP operators set their minds on achieving. Included in the new tools are:

- A step-by-step Success Guide
- Fresh educational activities
- A tracking tool to keep all required Challenge information in one place and to decrease the time required to fill out the attestation form

The Farm Fresh Challenge pledge opens on **August 12**. CNP operators who pledge to participate can choose to receive one of three options for promotional materials:

- “Locally Grown” static clings for serving lines (5 per site)
- “We Serve Local” buttons for staff (5 per site)
- “I Tried Local” stickers for students (150 per site)

Promotional materials will be sent out in time to arrive before the Challenge begins. Pledge participation on or before September 13 to get promotional materials delivered. Pledges will be accepted through the end of October - without the option to choose promotional materials. Facts collected in the pledge include contact information, Contracting Entity (CE) information, and information regarding Farm Fresh Challenge plans.

Once the Farm Fresh Challenge ends, the attestation form will need to be filled out and submitted to TDA. The form will open on November 1 and stay open until November 29. It collects information about local foods served, dollars spent on local foods, activities, social media posts, and more. The new tracking tool will help reduce the time spent filling out this form.

Local Procurement

One of the main concerns with purchasing local foods is procurement. CEs are worried that mistakes will be made during the procurement process. The good news is that there are plenty of resources to help with this process.

[“Finding, Buying and Serving Local Foods - Using Specifications to Target Local Products”](#)

[“Finding, Buying and Serving Local Foods - Using USDA Foods as a Resources to Purchase Local”](#)

[“Finding, Buying and Serving Local Foods – Using DOD Fresh to Purchase Local”](#)

Remember that as of **July 1**, CEs are allowed to use the words “locally grown/raised/caught” for procurement purposes.

Other resources for local procurement help include ESCs and other Child Nutrition Directors in your area. They are always happy to help other CNPs succeed.

Questions

Do you have Farm to School questions or subjects you’d like to learn more about? Submit this [form](#) to possibly have them answered/discussed in future E-Harvest issues.

Texas Farm Fresh Network



TDA is pleased to welcome the following producers to the Farm Fresh Network:

All Hale Meats, LLC	Wolfforth	Protein
Big Creek Beef, LLC	Riesel	Protein
Village Farms	Marfa	Fruit/Vegetable
Born & Raised	Emory	Protein
Fort Worth Meat Packers	Fort Worth	Protein

Contact TDA

Email: FarmFresh@TexasAgriculture.gov
Toll Free: (877) TEX-MEAL

Connect with Others

Texas Farm Fresh Network:

Use this tool to connect with Texas food companies that currently sell or are interested in selling to schools, childcare centers, adult care centers and summer meal programs. Company listings include contact information, product availability and distribution radius.

Funding Opportunities:

Financial support from organizations may help establish or advance local Farm Fresh initiatives. This list includes opportunities from TDA, USDA and other organizations.

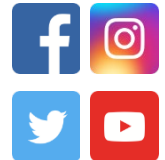
Interested in learning more about Texas products?

Sign up for the *Go Local. GO TEXAN E-zine* today.



TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
COMMISSIONER SID MILLER

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