



MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND COMMERCE

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COMMISSIONER

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Mississippi Grown Fruits and Vegetables Feeding Local Schools

School lunch programs in Mississippi Public Schools are now serving fresher, tastier produce – much to the delight of the students. The Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce and the Mississippi Department of Education are cooperating to put the Farm to School Program into every public school district in the state. Funds, provided by the United States Department of Defense, for the program are used to procure fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables. Produce is then allocated and delivered to participating schools – free of charge to the school and the State.

Commissioner of Agriculture Lester Spell is visiting schools across the state this week to see first hand the success of the program as it expands into its second year and to collect comments and suggestions from the students who consume the produce daily.

“This program is a very positive way to help our state. With the large volume of fruit and vegetable production in Mississippi, the Farm to School Program offers great opportunities statewide,” says Spell. “We brought the program to Mississippi for the benefit of many people. It creates new markets for our growers, and also provides fresh Mississippi grown fruits and vegetables for the students in our local schools. As fresh fruits and vegetables become more common and more popular in diets, demand for products will increase and pay dividends to our farmers.”

The Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce registers any grower desiring to participate in the program. Growers deliver their product to a central location and receive immediate payment. Mississippi Department of Education’s Office of Child Nutrition, Purchasing and Food Distribution Division, issues and collects surveys for each school district to determine quantity demanded. With the amount of produce that is available, the produce is then allocated and delivered to each district proportionally.

Gail Lynn supervises the program for the Mississippi Department of Education. Lynn states, “Obesity is an issue in schools, and this program gets the students accustomed to making healthy choices in their diets. By using Mississippi produce, everyone wins. Farmers benefit economically, and they assist the children with making healthy eating decisions.”

Lynn works closely with Guy Feltenstein, Director of Fruits and Vegetables for the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce. “This is a great opportunity for our growers. It ensures a new market and provides the opportunity to plant new varieties, as well as fall crops, for which there has not previously been a significant market.”

The program is available to each state in the nation with funds from the 2002 Farm Bill distributed on a fair share basis to participating states. In the school year 2002-2003, \$1.15 million was allocated to Mississippi. The current school year has an initial allotment of \$770, 987, but additional monies are expected to increase this figure.

“As the students knowingly eat and appreciate fresh Mississippi produce, they will have a greater understanding of the importance of agriculture,” said Spell. “This will keep a lot of Mississippi grown fruits and vegetables in the state. Fruit and vegetable growers gain a new, local outlet, and public awareness of Mississippi products increases through use in the cafeterias.”

Any fruit or vegetable producer interested in participating in the Farm to School Program should contact Guy Feltenstein at 601-483-3451 or e-mail at guyf@mdac.state.ms.us.