

Secretary of Agriculture Calls on Committee to Not Delay Expanding Farm to School Programs

(Washington, D.C.) – The House Committee on Education and Labor yesterday held a hearing on the Improving Nutrition for America’s Children Act, which would improve the quality of school meals and other child nutrition programs for 32 million children. This legislation contains an initiative written by U.S. Rep. Rush Holt (NJ-12) to require \$10 billion in funding for farm to school programs. Farm to School programs bring locally or regionally grown fresh produce into schools, thereby significantly improving nutrition for children eating school lunches. Holt said today that he expects the Committee to pass the bill in July and advance it to the full House.

“As a representative from the Garden State it should not be a surprise that I support bringing Jersey tomatoes and sweet corn into schools,” Holt said. “Farm to School programs support our local farmers and help in the fight against childhood obesity.”

Testifying in support of the legislation at today’s hearing, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack said that we cannot “delay the connection between the farm and school,” which is a crucial link between children and their food supply.

“We can’t be penny wise and a pound foolish with this one. What we feed children will determine their health as adults--how well they learn and perform in all areas of their lives,” said Beth Feehan of the New Jersey Farm to School Network. “We must put the resources together to improve the nutrition of our youngest citizens, especially those most at risk. We request all members of Congress to prioritize the food we eat as a central issue facing our nation. When our military states that they cannot command enough recruits due to the increase in obesity in the eligible population who can serve, it is time to take a serious look at what we are feeding children and make improvements now.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that as of 2008 almost 32 percent of our children were either overweight or obese. Obese children can develop adult diseases such as hypertension and Type-2 diabetes and, in the long term, these children are at increased risk for heart disease, stroke, and cancer. A study by *Mission:Readiness*, an organization of retired senior military leaders, found that more than 9 million young adults are too overweight to join the Armed Services.

In support of Holt's farm to school provisions, Adele H. LaTourette, Director of the New Jersey Anti-Hunger Coalition said, "In light of the increasingly limited budgets being seen in states throughout the nation, particularly in states like New Jersey which just this week eliminated all state funding for school breakfast and reduced state funding for school lunch to the bare minimum, it is critical that our nation's leaders work hard to pass a fully funded reauthorization of the Child Nutrition programs."

"In these challenging fiscal times, every dollar we spend must not only meet immediate needs but also make lasting improvements for the future," Holt added. "Because school food programs currently provide more than half of the daily nutrition for many children, it is vital that these meals are healthy ones. Farm to school programs increase the availability of fresh and locally grown food to improve our children's daily nutrition and can lead to permanent improvements in their diets and eating habits."