



CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

50 Columbus Blvd, Suite 701 | Hartford, Connecticut 06103 | 860.713.2500

Office of the Commissioner

Affirmative Action/Equal Employment Opportunity Employer



Appropriations Conservation and Development Subcommittee

March 8, 2023

CT Department of Agriculture

Good morning Chairs Hartley and Gibson, Ranking Members Gordon and DeCaprio and honorable members of the Conservation and Development Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Bryan Hurlburt, the Commissioner of Agriculture.

Our subcommittee information requests were broken down into three primary categories, the WIC/Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, general agricultural industry information, and the Connecticut Grown for Connecticut Kids Grant Program.

The Agricultural Industry In Connecticut:

Diversity in Connecticut Agriculture: according to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, 1.4% of Connecticut producers identify as Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color, amount to 164 producers. However, it is anticipated that there are many BIPOC farmers who either did not participate in the census and/or do not meet USDA's definition of a farm, which would require \$1,000 produced and sold.

DOAG Efforts to address diversity: In March of 2021, DoAg established the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Working Group. The DEI working groups are a crucial component of an agency-wide effort to engage and support current and future farmers in Connecticut's agricultural industry who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC). The goals of our DEI working group include:

- Build and strengthen relationships between DoAg and producers who identify as Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC)
- Increase engagement of BIPOC producers, and
- Produce an annual report with actionable recommendations to help guide CT DoAg and service providers in the agricultural industry. This report is in its final stages internally and is anticipated to be released in Spring 2023

Through the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) Specialty Crop Block Grant, the agency received \$290,000 in FY 2021 to do the following:

- Establish a pilot BIPOC mentorship/apprentice program
- Improve marketing to increase access to resources for beginning and BIPOC producers, and
- Establish a study with land trusts looking at how to make land, particularly urban parcels, more accessible to producers.

In February 2023, the Department sponsored and helped to facilitate the first conference in the state focused on diversity in agriculture.

Outreach to urban farmers: In addition to our DEI work, the Department has identified "urban and nontraditional farming practices" as eligible criteria for our grant programs. In recent years, awarded grants have supported urban production, agriculture education, and expanded markets in



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urban areas through CT Grown for CT Kids Grants, Farm Viability Grant Program, and CT Grown Marketing Plan. The Department continues to work cooperatively with UConn's Urban Farming Specialist and the CT Agricultural Experiment Station's Urban Ag Scientist.

New Farmer Microgrant Information (Farm Transition Grant) In 2021, the Department created a new category in the Farm Transition Grant, a New Farmer Microgrant. The Farm Transition Grant is funded through the Community Investment Act. The application process for new farmers is a simplified version of the existing application for those requesting greater than \$5,000. The Department has hosted informational webinars, posts grant guidance information including step by step instructions, and has staff available to answer eligibility questions for new farmers. DoAg does not assist with grant writing for applicants.

In order to be eligible for a New Farmer Microgrant, applicants must meet the following criteria:

- Be a farm owner and have been in production for at least one full year, up to three years
- Apply for or possess a Farmers Tax Exemption Permit through the Department of Revenue Services
- Have a drafted 2-5 year business plan
- Complete a DOAG Crop Plan and/or specialty crop plan
- Tenants must include a written landlord consent form between all necessary parties regarding the submitted project.

In program year 2021, 6 recipients were awarded, and total spending was \$28,687.

In program year 2022, 9 recipients were awarded, and total spending was \$43,125.

In program year 2023, 10 recipients were awarded and total spending was \$49,250.

Vertical Gardens and Urban Farming information: DoAg's Farm Viability Grant and Specialty Crop Block Grants are funding opportunities for urban farming and/or vertical gardens. The CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program has also supported the purchase of multiple vertical grow towers in Pre-K through grade 12 classrooms.

Farmers Market Nutrition Program:

(Program information)

The Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) serves participants of Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) and seniors, over the age of 60, who meet income eligibility guidelines by providing coupons to purchase fresh fruit, vegetables, cut herbs and honey, and chicken eggs at authorized locations throughout Connecticut.

WIC FMNP is a congressionally authorized program administered by DoAg and jointly funded by the State of Connecticut and USDA, Food and Nutrition Services (USDA FNS). The program provides a coupon booklet to WIC participants that are identified as "nutritionally at risk". These booklets are distributed to local WIC agencies statewide by DoAg through a partnership with the Department of Public Health (DPH).



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Senior FMNP (SFMNP) is a supplemental food program for individuals over the age of 60 or those who live in congregate housing where congregate nutrition services are provided and meet income eligibility.

Each participants receives the following:

- WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program participants receive both a \$32 booklet (check booklet funded with state funds) annually, as well as a \$16 booklet (check booklet funded with federal funds) annually. WIC participants who have utilized all of their checks are eligible to request additional check booklets.
- Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program participants receive, at federal check distribution sites, a \$20 booklet annually- these are check booklets are funded with federal funds. At state check distribution sites, they receive a \$24 booklet annually- these are check booklets funded with state funds.

In each booklet, there are instructions outlining products that can be purchased. On the checks themselves, it states what the check can be used at a farmers' market.

A list of farmers' markets where the vouchers can be redeemed is also included in the distributed information. As markets are added, email distribution notices are sent so distributors are aware and encourage users to be aware of the new location.

Tri-fold brochures were distributed to 23 local WIC offices where all participants are eligible. They were produced in both English and Spanish and contained tips and recommendations on how to best utilize the SFMNP benefits, storing vegetables for later use, and availability of CT Grown farm products

Protein as an eligible food source: Public Act 21-155 added chicken eggs as an eligible product for State Funded WIC and Senior FMNP benefits. Currently, eggs are an ineligible item using federally funded benefits due to federal regulations only allowing unprocessed fresh fruits and vegetables.

What is being done to publicize the program? In 2022, the Department shared information regarding the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program with the Hartford Healthy Food Collaborative, farmers markets throughout the state, the DPH SHIP Advisory Council, and at events throughout the state. Information on these programs was also shared with the legislature to share with their constituents. DoAg produced posters for distribution sites and signboards for farmers' markets to raise awareness of the programs and redemption sites. The 11x17 posters for distribution sites included a QR code to access the most recent listing of authorized redemption sites. 25x36 signboards were developed for farmers' markets to display to promote that they were an authorized redemption site.

DoAg worked with the Office of Skill Development to create three looping presentations on the DSS and DMV Visix Network screen at DSS service centers and DMV locations throughout the state. Each graphic has been made available in both English and Spanish.



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What can be done to bolster the program? DoAg continues to strive to reach those in need. There are nearly 300 farmers throughout the state that are certified to accept FMNP benefits and over 100 farm stands and farmers' markets where the benefits can be redeemed.

In FY 22 and FY 23, both the WIC and Seniors FMNP programs received an additional \$100,000 in one-time American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) allocation to provide additional funding to help offset the negative economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic..

Number of people served by town/distribution sites: Please see the attached spreadsheet highlighting the WIC and SFMNP distribution sites by town.

WIC Participation Trends: Redemption by town is not available, however, overall redemption is tracked by DoAg. In 2022, state redemption for WIC FMNP was 38% and federal redemption was 27%. Since DoAg over issues checks, we also review the fund usage annually. The fund usage for 2022 was 62.4% state and 43.7% federal.

Redemption Rates:

Please see attached document with redemption numbers, including checks issued and redemption rate for the previous 5 program years.

Projected FY 23 Spending by type within Senior FMNP: In FY 23, the Senior food budget will go 100% to food benefits. Administrative costs are covered by federal funds and through one-time ARPA funding.

Do Senior Food Vouchers receive federal funding: Annually, less than \$79,000 is provided by USDA FNS for the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. Of that, 10% is dedicated to administration expenses. The remainder, approximately \$70,000 is dedicated to food benefits.

Connecticut Grown for Connecticut Kids (CTG4CTK)

Funding: CT Grown for CT Kids was allocated through one-time ARPA funding of \$250,000 for FY 2021, \$500,000 for FY 2022 and was not included in the Governor's proposed budget.

Funding Requests per year: In FY 22, DoAg received 59 complete applications, totaling \$962,425 in requested funds. In FY 23, DoAg received 72 applications, totaling \$1,022,284 in requested funds.

List of awardees by town: Please see attached spreadsheet which includes a list of awardees by town, funding allocation, and brief project description.

Assistance provided by DoAg to potential applicants: DoAg worked in partnership with the CT Grown for CT Kids Advisory Committee, the CT Farm to School Collaborative, and the State Department of Education to widely publicize the availability of grant funds. In both grant award rounds, DoAg held an information session to review grant guidance documents, application criteria, and answer potential applicant questions.



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In FY 22 and FY 23, applicants were able to receive technical assistance in writing proposals from Sustainable Food System Educators at UCONN Extension, who are partners in CT Farm to School Initiatives.

Post Grant Award Support: Once an applicant has been awarded, the agency will compile an agreement between both parties, including a contract training workshop to explain their contractual obligations, payment terms, reporting requirements, etc. Once the agreement is executed, agency continues to work with awardees on the status of their projects and support them as appropriate or as warranted.

Existing Farm to School Programs: DoAg is a member of the CT Farm to School Collaborative and on the steering committee, which is a statewide network group created to elevate and support Farm to School efforts.

Through DoAg's awarded 2021 USDA Farm to School grant, the department hired UConn's Zwich center to conduct a statewide Farm to School procurement study with all School Food Authorities (SFA's). This report is expected to be concluded next month and will contain data on who is purchasing local products, from whom, and how to increase the relationships with CT farms and reduce existing barriers.

At the end of February 2023, DoAg, in collaboration with UConn PLOYT conducted an in-person Farm to School producer training to review the basics of school meals, how to work with and connect with schools, and included a facilitator mixer with CT school food directors.

In 2023, Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) will administer the USDA Local Food for School Program in CT, which will provide funds to CT school food directors to purchase farm products from CT producers. DoAg has been working with CSDE and UConn PLOYT to establish a technical assistance system to facilitate these purchasing relationships once these funds are announced.