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Plaskett, Others Introduce Legislation to Expand Farm to School Grant Program

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V.I. Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett and House representatives Alma Adams and Jeff Fortenberry on Thursday introduced the H.R. 1768 - the Farm to School Act of 2021 bill, which seeks to expand participation in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm to School Grant Program to preschools, after-school programs, and summer food service sites. The measure also seeks to increase annual mandatory funding from \$5 to \$15 million.

“H.R.1768 - is a bill that will transform the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act in order to reauthorize the farm to school program, and for other purposes. Millions of students are eating healthier and engaged in food and agriculture education because of the Farm to School Program. It is a commonsense program that benefits children and their families while providing economic opportunities to our farmers,” said Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett, a senior member of

the House Committee on Agriculture.

“The increased demand for Farm to School programming tells us that more people are beginning to understand the connection between local foods and healthy young minds. I’m proud to introduce this bipartisan legislation in support of our nation’s schools and local farmers who help improve classroom diets and local economies. Through the Farm to School Grant Program, participating schools, nonprofit organizations, and local, state and tribal governments can help schools offer locally grown, fresh food to students. The bill expands markets for farmers, fishers, ranchers and food entrepreneurs and includes provisions targeting increased participation from beginning veteran and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.”

Sommer Sibilly, Founder and Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, said, “There are many organizations like ours across the nation that need support to effectively develop and sustain farm to school programs for their communities. For the U.S. territories, access to this funding is critical. In 2015, we received a USDA Farm to School Grant to host our first Farm to School Conference in the Virgin Islands and it felt like an auspicious start. However, due to lack of resources, we have been unable to host another. While USDA has done a phenomenal job awarding existing grants, limited funding and the program structure do not ensure equity. In my experience, a community's success with implementing farm to school is predicated on readiness and infrastructure.”

Ms. Adams, vice chair of the House Committee on Agriculture, stated, "The Farm to School Grant Program supports healthy students and strengthens our local food systems. The Farm to School Act of 2021 expands participation in this critical program and increases its funding, which is more important than ever as our students, schools and farmers face difficult challenges due to the global pandemic. Teachers, parents, and farmers all know that healthy students are successful students, so I am proud to support the introduction of this important legislation.”

“When the pandemic began, school nutrition professionals, educators and local food producers – the people who make farm to school work – were some of the very first community members to step up and ensure the ongoing care and support of children and families,” stated Karen Spangler, policy director with National Farm to School Network. “The measures included in the Farm to School Act will give them much-needed resources to continue their work as we emerge from the pandemic. Furthermore, the bill’s emphasis on ensuring equitable access to this important grant program will help those most impacted by the pandemic, including Native and tribal communities, racially diverse communities, and early care and education sites. There has never been a better time to build on the successes of this program.”

Wes King, senior policy specialist with the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, said, " Food is fundamental to our very existence, and learning about food – where it comes from, who grows it, and how it feeds our bodies and minds – should be a fundamental part of all students’ educational experience. Over the last 15 years, farm to school programs in the U.S. have helped thousands of schools to connect their students with real, healthy foods. These programs have also served as powerful economic drivers, generating hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue for family farmers each year, according to the most recent USDA Farm to School Census. The Farm to School Act is the cornerstone of a series of proposals supported by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition that, if included in the next Child Nutrition Act Reauthorization, would help improve health outcomes for our children and economic outcomes for family farmers across the country.”

According to the release, since 2010 Congress has provided \$5 million annually for this competitive grant program that increases the use of, and improves access to, local foods in schools, while promoting food education for our nation's children. Since 2013, USDA has received more than 1,900 applications requesting over \$141 million, however, only 437 awards were granted from the \$30 million available (\$5 million per year). The Farm to School Act increases annual mandatory funding for Farm to School to \$15 million to meet the current need and increases the maximum individual grant award to \$250,000.

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