



## USDA deputy secretary encourages farmers to sell locally

By SUE ROESLER, Farm & Ranch Guide | Posted: Wednesday, May 11, 2011 11:44 am

BISMARCK, N.D. - Trying to figure out how farmers throughout the world will be able to feed nine billion people by 2050 is one of the greatest challenges at the USDA, according to Kathleen Merrigan, the agriculture deputy secretary at USDA.

Merrigan was in Bismarck last month speaking at the 2011 American Indian Higher Education student conference about the USDA's "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" initiative. She is traveling to every state in the union giving her insight on the venture.

"The challenges we are facing in agriculture are the challenges of your time," Merrigan told the students assembled at the Bismarck Civic Center. "There are currently 6.9 billion people but the U.N. predicts there will be nine billion by 2050, and we're trying to figure out how we are going to feed that population."

Local and regional food grown by local farmers and sold in the region is one important way of meeting that challenge, she said.

"We can keep more of our dollars in our local and regional communities," Merrigan said.

John and Annie Carlson of Cleveland, N.D., were in the audience with personnel from the North Dakota Natural Resources Conservation Services. Annie said they grow all kinds of vegetables during the summer on their "Morning Joy Farms" and sell a box of produce to those in the Jamestown, N.D., region for \$375 for 15 weeks. They also sell broiler chickens and broiler eggs.

"I love what we're doing and we are making a living with this project," Annie said, adding they have been in the business for three years.

Merrigan said other ways of meeting the "new challenges" of feeding the world are such new ag technologies as double cropping.

"Ag is at the heart of some of your generation's most pressing issues," she said, adding how people riot around food security issues and environmental sustainability.

"A lot of people view ag and the environment at odds, but as farmers, you value your land and make sure you protect your natural resources," she added.

Conservation is important to the USDA, and Merrigan said they want to have better cost-share programs for farmers. For example, USDA has cost-sharing for greenhouses and hoop buildings, along with other conservation practices such as no-till that improve agricultural production while protecting soil, water and other natural resources.

With the new standards for nutrition programs, USDA is encouraging local producers to partner with their local schools to use locally grown food and meat for school lunches.

Currently, farmers are receiving only 16 cents of every dollar the consumer spends on food. "That is not right," she said.

The "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" initiative emphasizes the need for a strong connection between producers and consumers and can improve the money farmers receive, Merrigan said.

She pointed out several instances where local farmers are selling to local communities and doing well. One example was a beef co-op in Minneapolis-St. Paul that sells beef in that area to local consumers.

She also mentioned Shepherd's Grain, a Food Alliance Certified wheat co-op of 33 farmers. The co-op sells specialty wheat products in the Pacific Northwest, and their agronomist is a farmer in Montana.

"If you build local food systems, does it build on that 16 cents?" she asked.

"Local is hot," she added, stating USDA expects consumer demand for locally grown food in the U.S. to rise from an estimated \$4 billion in 2002 to as much as \$7 billion by 2012.

There has been a lack of economic opportunities in rural America, and there is a lot of poverty in rural areas, said the deputy secretary. When farmers leave the farm because they can't make a living, the poverty situation grows in rural communities, she added.

"Traditional farming is not making ends meet. The average age of the farmer is 56. Who is the next generation to fill their shoes?" she said.

To help, USDA is providing loan and grant programs to beginning farmers and other farmers to keep them on the farm.

Merrigan also talked about the nutrition "paradox" in America, where obesity and hunger exist at the same time.

"It exists because there is a lack of access to good healthy food," Merrigan said. "It is so important for children to outlive their parents."

To combat that, local food initiatives are helping. In Detroit, a van brings local produce around to people in the city, and there are many programs for children based on "Ag in the Classroom."

Merrigan said biofuels are important because they help make farms and dairies sustainable. Currently, USDA is helping install methane digesters which reduce greenhouse gas emissions from manure by capturing methane and converting it to heat or electricity. With the manure from cows on the farm, they can also make biogas.

It will take a united effort of everyone working together, she pointed out.

"We can lay a new foundation for economic growth and create jobs while building and revitalizing rural communities across America by supporting and establishing local and regional food systems as an economic development strategy to keep wealth in local communities," she said.

The "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" website located on the Internet at [www.usda.gov/knowyourfarmer](http://www.usda.gov/knowyourfarmer) features conversation about strengthening rural communities, supporting local farmers, promoting healthy eating, and protecting natural resources.

It also brings stories of local farmers and their products so consumers can get to know their local farmers.