



# Farm to School Routes

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SPOTLIGHT STORY

## New North Florida Cooperative— Farmers at the Head of the Class

As one of the eight regional lead agencies for the National Farm to School Network, the **New North Florida Cooperative Association Inc. (NNFC)** is the hub for farm to school activities in the Southern region. In this role, NNFC supports the National Network in areas of policy, information, media, and networking opportunities, as well as training and technical assistance for individuals working on farm to school issues. Although they are based in Florida, their regional responsibilities cover Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.

**Glyen Holmes** is the South Regional Lead Agency Coordinator. Originally from Mississippi, Glyen has worked in small-scale agriculture most of his life. He received a Bachelor of Science in Agronomy from Alcorn State University (MS), and worked with the USDA for 18 years before entering the private sector as Executive Director of the NNFC. He has over 20 years of experience working closely with small-scale farmers in market development and production and value-added agriculture in the Southeast.

Under his leadership, the New North Florida Cooperative has helped school food service incorporate locally or regionally grown fruit and vegetables into child nutrition programs. Glyen's efforts have demonstrated an innovative way to promote healthy eating and enhance nutrition for school meals while cultivating schools as a local market for small-scale farmers. The NNFC also provides training for food service personnel in menu planning, local product procurement, fresh produce storage and preparation.

Glyen has worked with farmers, school districts, and numerous other partners in Florida, and throughout the Southern Region. One of those beneficial partnerships

has been with Vonda Richardson, Extension Specialist for Florida A&M University Cooperative Extension Program, who has collaborated with the NNFC for over 10 years on promoting farm to school efforts. Vonda has a B.S. and M.S. in Agriculture Economics and has over 12 years experience working with small-scale farmers in marketing and farm business development.

One of the pioneers of the farm to school approach, the NNFC has been working with school districts providing fresh produce for school meals since 1995. NNFC has 60-100 involved farmers at any given time from the states of Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas.



They have served over one million students in 72 school districts! The cooperative is responsible for the marketing, handling, processing, and delivery services of agricultural products produced by participating local small farm operators. The NNFC also hosts field trips that allow students to see first-hand where and how

their food is grown and prepared.

North Florida, where the program initially began, is an economically depressed area with high unemployment rates. Farm to school was a boon for all sides of the equation: farmers, land use, children, schools, community, and the local economy. Farmers saw that sourcing to schools would create a new market that could bring stability, profitability, and organization to small operations that could not get by on their own. The farmers wanted bargaining power; to be "price-makers" instead of the usual "price-takers." From the food service perspective, integrating fresh local produce into school meals was a nutritionally sound decision that benefited the local economy and community. It was a win-win-win situation.

## How it Works

Farm to school is more complicated than asking a farmer to grow carrots and then instantly having local fresh carrot sticks at lunch. The NNFC illustrates how it can be done. The cooperative has a storage, refrigeration, and processing facility where it operates its washing, cutting, and bagging equipment, so that schools, which often do not have full-scale kitchens, can receive ready to use products. The NNFC is able to offer local foods at competitive prices so that schools are not paying more to buy local. The processing and value-added packaging maintains the quality and freshness of their products, providing convenience to food services that are not able to handle fresh, “unprocessed” greens; and differentiates the cooperative’s products from other product lines.

The signature products offered by NNFC year-round are bagged collard greens and sweet potato sticks. Additionally, the cooperative provides strawberries, blackberries, watermelon, okra, turnip greens, green beans, muscadine grapes, and ground goat meat. They also offer a variety of peas—including black-eyed, purple hull, butter, and cream.

It is often challenging to organize and manage delivery of fresh products to numerous sites that have varying requirements. The NNFC has created an efficient system to handle distribution of product. Farmers drop off their products at the cooperative where it is processed. Then, refrigerated trucks make deliveries two to three times a week so that the food arrives within one to two days of when it will be served. This system has made the cooperative a reliable distributor of quality produce.

So how does the New North Florida Cooperative manage to afford this system? The economic benefit of direct sales. NNFC has been sustainable since its inception, with 90% of its funding coming from direct marketing sales. The few loans and grants they have received have helped build infrastructure with equipment purchases. The main challenge to sustainability is keeping farmers involved, and thus providing continuity of the product delivered to school districts.

The NNFC program provides a buffet of benefits. First, school districts are able to incorporate fresh, local products in school meals and increase the nutritional value of the food they offer their students. Second, farmers have access to an alternative market. Third, the cooperative itself has created jobs for local residents: depending on the season there are 5-10 day laborers at the cooperative. The cooperative provides a finished product in a manner that allows schools to treat them like any other vendor. The NNFC farm to school model is successful because it benefits the school and local community without burdening food services.

Once the bell rings announcing the lunch period is over, one realizes farm to school is about more than carrot sticks on a tray; the roots extend much deeper and farther. Farm to school makes nutritious, fresh produce a quintessential part of all children’s diets no matter what their income level. To learn more about the New North Florida Cooperative Association Inc., visit: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/TMD/MSB/PDFpubList/sfss-4.pdf>