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New Report Finds California's Nation-Leading Investments in Farm to School Stabilize Farmers' Businesses, Expand Climate-Friendly Environmental Farming Practices

Small and midsize farms, women, and BIPOC farmers especially benefit

Berkeley, California – A new [report](#) released today reveals that California farmers participating in the state's Farm to School Incubator Grant Program are increasing sales of fresh, local, and organic produce, meat and dairy products to schools, according to researchers evaluating program impacts. The report found that 57% of the program's farmers made sales to schools between April and September 2023, representing an average of 33% of their total farm revenues. All food producers funded by the Farm to School Grant Program state that they use or plan to use climate smart agricultural practices in their operations during the grant period.

California has made the largest investment of any state in the country in farm to school programs, allocating approximately \$100 million from 2020 through 2022. The report, authored by an independent group of [researchers](#) from UC Agriculture and Natural Resources (UC ANR), UC Berkeley, Food Insight Group, Berkeley Food Institute, and U.S. Department of Agriculture, shows those investments are beginning to pay off beyond increasing kids' exposure to food education and California-grown fruits and vegetables.

While existing research shows that kids who engage with farm to school programs eat more fruits and vegetables, are more willing to try healthy foods, and even perform better in class, the California farm to school evaluation project examines a gap that most farm to school research hasn't addressed: how local purchases from schools affect the agricultural sector and the environment.

The report found that the investments are flowing primarily to the farmers the state seeks to support through this program: Of the 50 producer grantees evaluated in this report, 42% are owned by people who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, and 62% are owned by women. Nearly all (94%) are small to midsize operations.

Three producer grantees revealed that the Farm to School Incubator Grant Program funding likely prevented them from going out of business. One farmer noted that, "This grant ... has and

will enable us to do things on the farm that would probably take us a decade to do but we'll be able to do that in one or two seasons. So [it] really moves us forward a lot.”

“Farmers are expanding their relationships with local school districts, increasing their sales to schools, investing in infrastructure and staff, and forming new relationships with food hubs that can help them with the often complex purchasing requirements unique to school food,” said Dr. Beth Katz, a lead researcher and Executive Director of Food Insight Group. “While we’re still at a very early stage of understanding the impacts of these investments, we’re beginning to see patterns emerge.”

A Humboldt County farmer noted that food hubs, which are also supported by the grant program, are critical to their success in accessing the school food market: “[The food hub] is really a huge game changer to be able to make that one drop in town, even though it’s an hour away, rather than going to [several school sites] and just making all these little drops. That’s been one of the ways that it’s very . . . appealing to us as a farm to participate.”

The report also examines the potential for environmental impacts through direct investments in farmers who use climate-friendly farming practices.

“I’m inspired by the potential for the farm to school program to support farmers using environmentally beneficial practices like reducing pesticides, planting cover crops, and growing organic — and to help farmers expand or adopt these practices. It’s essential these farmers have a market for what they grow to see durable environmental benefits,” said Dr. Tim Bowles, who is leading the environmental impacts assessment for the evaluation team and is an Assistant professor in the Department of Environmental Science, Policy & Management at UC Berkeley and Lead Faculty Director of the Berkeley Food Institute. “We’re also seeing farms actually expand their acreage in order to sell to schools, suggesting this is a desirable market. We’re investigating the environmental impacts from these investments, especially for climate.”

As with many new programs aimed at building out long-delayed infrastructure, school food systems improvement demands a deep-rooted approach.

“The challenges around changing a complex school food system are substantial,” Dr. Gail Feenstra, a pioneer in farm to school research and co-lead on the project from UC ANR stated. “Decades of research shows the value to children from fresh, locally sourced food. However, what is becoming more clear from this research is that long-term investments in the full farm to school *system* are crucial. Without regional-level infrastructure, staffing, aggregation, and distribution in place to support getting that locally grown food from farms to the schools and kids, we’ll have challenges moving the needle. Fortunately, the state’s strategic and innovative investments in the entire farm to school supply chain -- meaning funding for school districts, farmers, and also their regional partners, combined with support from CDFR’s regional staff -- are beginning to address those long-standing challenges.”

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[California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program](#)

As part of California's nation-leading investment in farm to school programs, the California Department of Food and Agriculture Office of Farm to Fork (CDFA-F2F) has received funding through the California Budget Acts of 2020, 2021 and 2022 to establish and continue the California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program to support projects that cultivate equity, nurture students, build climate resilience, and create scalable and sustainable change.

- In 2021, CDFA-F2F awarded \$8.5 million in grant funding to 60 farm to school projects across the state.
- In 2022, CDFA-F2F awarded \$25.5 million in grant funding to 120 farm to school projects across the state.
- In 2024, CDFA-F2F awarded \$52.8 million in grant funding to farm to school projects across the state.

[California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program Evaluation](#)

The Farm to School Incubator Grant Program is being evaluated by an independent team of researchers with expertise in food systems, policy analysis, sociology, spatial data collection and analysis, environmental science, and agricultural economics, and is funded by the state of California. The research team is tasked with providing a comprehensive analysis of the economic, environmental, and social impacts of the Farm to School grant program, including a final report at the end of 2026. The research team includes researchers and policy experts from UC Agriculture and Natural Resources, UC Berkeley, Food Insight Group, Berkeley Food Institute, and U.S. Department of Agriculture.