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Grant program supports farm to school efforts

ANCA awards mini grants to three North Country food businesses

SARANAC LAKE, NY - It will soon get easier for three North Country businesses to produce local food for area school children. The Adirondack North Country Association (ANCA) announced the recipients of its 2018 Farmer/Producer Mini Grant program, which was designed to support the farm to school procurement process for local food producers and Jefferson and Saint Lawrence County schools.

The second round of grant recipients since the program's inception in 2017 include two farms and one co-packer, whose proposed projects will increase their capacity to supply schools with local food. A total of \$4,500 will partially fund the purchase of seeds and supplies for [Agbotic](#), an organic greenhouse operation in Sackets Harbor, NY; the purchase of a new brusher/washer unit at [North Branch Farms](#), a vegetable farm and orchard in Belleville, NY; and an industrial apple corer and slicer for [Big Spoon Kitchen](#) based out of Potsdam, NY.

"As the local food movement continues to gain momentum in the region, schools and other large institutions face a variety of unique challenges providing local farm products in their cafeterias," said Josh Bakelaar, ANCA's Local Economies and Agriculture Director. ANCA, an economic development nonprofit organization based in Saranac Lake, developed the Farmer/Producer Mini Grant Program in 2017 to help overcome barriers related to infrastructure, storage and food safety regulations.

"The goal is to make it easier for schools to purchase fresh and minimally processed food from our region's farms and food producers," said Bakelaar.

Farm operators Kevin Richardson of Agbotic and Jay Canzonier of North Branch Farms have been involved in the Drive for 25 Farm to School program since it launched in Jefferson and St. Lawrence Counties in 2016. Besides growing, packing and delivering fresh produce for area schools, the two growers have also been involved in education and outreach efforts like farm to school picnics, "meet the farmer" events and farm tours for school district food service directors.

“From the beginning, Agbotic saw this program as a great opportunity to reach more families and expand our own in-soil organic production,” said Richardson, vice president of sales for the Sackets Harbor operation. All year long, Agbotic grows a variety of organic and chemical-free root crops with greens in fully automated, environmentally controlled greenhouses.

“We’re getting fresh, healthy, organic food in front of school kids who may not have access to fresh greens at home. That’s such an important step in developing an appreciation of local food and farming,” Richardson said. “This grant will help Agbotic grow more healthy food this year for more local schools. We’re excited about what that means for the region’s farm to school efforts as well as our own business goals.”

Rose Rivezzi and Will Trithart, owners of Big Spoon Kitchen, process and package locally grown fruits and vegetables out of Cornell Cooperative Extension’s shared-use Harvest Kitchen in Canton. With distribution support from St. Lawrence-Lewis BOCES, Big Spoon has supplied schools with sliced carrots, wedged apples and fresh salsa mix. Their mini grant award will go toward the purchase of a new corer and slicer that will increase the efficiency of their apple processing.

The mini grant program is part of the larger “Drive for 25” Farm to School initiative which provides increased state funding of up to 25 cents per meal for schools in order to expand local food purchasing. The goal of the program is to increase local food options in Jefferson and Saint Lawrence County schools. Assemblywoman Addie Jenne (D-Theresa) spearheaded the program in 2016 and has led the effort to secure State funding for three consecutive years.

"This program has helped farmers grow their businesses and enter new markets while allowing school food service programs to offer fresh local produce and meats," Jenne said. "The program gives kids the ability to learn about farming and nutrition, but, most importantly, they get to eat great tasting food and know the difference from processed foods and produce that is weeks old. Our children can tell the difference and value the local food, and they will help us strengthen the agriculture industry when they buy for their own families."

Drive for 25 has received a total of \$900,000 in state funding over the last three years. Since 2016, the program has grown to include 20 participating school districts, 22 local farms selling directly to schools, over 24,000 students with access to local food in school and over 270,000 pounds of 47 different local food products offered at breakfast and lunch.

“These farms and businesses are helping develop a more efficient process for increasing the amount of local food available to local school kids,” said Bakelaar. “We’re grateful for their participation in the process and happy to support their efforts through the mini grant program.”

[ANCA](#) is an independent nonprofit organization growing the New Economy in northern New York. Using an integrated approach to sustainable economic development and prosperity where economic health, community vitality and ecological stewardship are equally important outcomes, ANCA focuses on creating opportunity for people with diverse backgrounds, experience and education levels.

[Assemblywoman Addie Jenne](#) represents the 116th Assembly District, the so-called River District stretching from the shores of Lake Ontario in Jefferson County to the banks of the St. Lawrence River in the town of Massena in St. Lawrence County and includes the cities of Watertown and Ogdensburg and the towns of Canton and Potsdam. She serves on the state Assembly's Agriculture Committee and is chair of the state Assembly's Task Force on Food, Farm & Nutrition Policy.

Attached: one (1) PDF document and five (5) image files:

All photos, courtesy of ANCA:

Photo 1: Kevin Richardson, Vice President of Sales, Agbotic

Photo 2: Jay Canzonier, Owner, North Branch Farms

Photo 3: Kevin Richardson of Agbotic speaks with Starbuck Elementary School staff and students as part of a “meet the farmers” farm to school event in January 2018 in Watertown, NY.

Photo 4: Jay Canzonier of North Branch Farms, center, speaks with Starbuck Elementary School students and school staff as part of a “meet the farmers” farm to school event in January 2017 in Watertown, NY.

Photo 5: Kevin Richardson (back row, third from left) of Agbotic and Jay Canzonier (back row, second from right) of North Branch Farms, during a “meet the farmer” event with students and staff at Starbuck Elementary School in Watertown in January 2018. Both farmers have been involved in the Watertown School District’s Drive for 25 farm to school efforts since 2016.

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