NC State–Led Project Secures $399,923 Grant to Strengthen Farm-to-Institution Food Supply Chains

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Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SSARE) has awarded a $399,923 grant to North Carolina State University (NC State), North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (N.C. A&T), and the Lumbee Farmers Cooperative to design, pilot, and evaluate a coordinated Farm to Institution supply chain model. The initiative brings together Farm to Early Care and Education, Farm to School, Farm to University, and Farm to Senior Services to expand market access for small and mid-size farmers while strengthening community food security.

The project is led by Dara Bloom, Assistant Director of Community-Based Food Systems at the Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS) and Associate Professor and Local Foods Extension Specialist at NC State, who serves as principal investigator. Running from 2024 to 2027, the project is supported by co-principal investigators from NC State and N.C. A&T, alongside students from both institutions.

The pilot phase is taking place in Robeson County, North Carolina, and focuses on identifying and addressing logistical barriers that limit small farmers' access to institutional markets. By coordinating multiple Farm to Institution supply chains, the project aims to introduce efficiencies and synergies that improve how regional food systems operate, with lessons that can be applied across North Carolina and beyond.

A wide network of partners is involved, including Aramark at UNC-Pembroke Dining Services, the Robeson County Partnership for Children, Lumber River Area Agency on Aging, Robeson County School Nutrition Program, Robeson County Cooperative Extension, the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina, and multiple

farmers based in Robeson County.

The initiative recognises institutions such as schools, childcare providers, universities, and senior services as anchor institutions that can both support local farmers and serve as critical food access points for communities. By integrating locally grown food into these settings, the project seeks to improve access to healthy food while creating reliable new markets for farmers.

Robeson County was selected for the pilot due to its strong agricultural base and significant Native American population. Working closely with farmers from the Lumbee Tribe, the project provides technical assistance to support market readiness. According to Bloom, coordinating across Farm to Institution programmes offers a practical way to overcome long-standing barriers and build a more resilient, locally rooted food system.

The first pilot phase ran from May to August 2025, linking four local farmers with four childcare centres and one assisted living facility. A simple ordering system using Google Forms was introduced to streamline communication and ordering. Farmers shared product availability biweekly, orders were consolidated and distributed, and deliveries were coordinated the following week. The pilot generated valuable insights into the operational realities of supplying institutions of varying size and complexity.

Building on these lessons, N.C. A&T Professor Lauren Davis and undergraduate student Andrew Porter have developed a new ordering app to further simplify communication, ordering, and delivery coordination. The app is designed to function without an intermediary and will be tested in the next pilot phase planned for summer 2026.

Also planned for 2026 is the inclusion of two larger institutional markets: the Robeson County school system and the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Accessing these markets requires Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification, and the project has already delivered GAP training and ongoing support to participating farmers in collaboration with the Lumbee Tribe.

By 2027, the project will produce tools and resources to help other communities replicate the integrated Farm to Institution model. Its long-term goal is to strengthen regional food systems, improve farmer profitability, enhance food access, and support sustainable agriculture practices that benefit both communities and the environment.