

MADISON FARMS  
NC COOPERATIVE EXTENSION,  
MADISON COUNTY



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# Press Release

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## **MADISON FARMS TO SCHOOLS PROGRAM CONNECTS COMMUNITY**

MARSHALL, NC, JANUARY 9, 2006: Madison County, a rural farming county situated a few miles north of Asheville, North Carolina, has embarked upon a new era in supplying local farm-grown produce to local schools. Support of a Farm-To-School project in the county comes from farmers, schools, and parents and reflects a national initiative to restore the connection between farms and communities. "This effort would not have come to fruition without the North Carolina Rural Center, ARC, Madison County Government, and farmer donations," explains Ross Young, Madison County's Cooperative Extension Director. These efforts created the Madison County Multiple Use Agricultural Complex which houses the value-added processing center that cleans and packages the locally grown produce.

The shift in marketing provides a win-win for the farmers and the community. Farmers benefit from the reliability of having

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continuous local customers. Students benefit from the good nutrition of local foods as well as understanding the importance of the role and culture of farming. Madison County farmers themselves donated over \$35,000 in time and funds in order for schools such as Mars Hill College, Madison County Public Schools, and Asheville City Schools to receive fresh, locally grown foods in their cafeterias.

Dewain Mackey, a Madison County farmer who oversaw the value-added processing center in 2005, began providing his own hydroponic lettuce to Mars Hill College in 2004. "Farming has become a rather difficult way to make a living," says Mackey; but he is "optimistic that the solution is developing new markets that are reliable from year to year." To that end, the Madison Farms project tries to organize suppliers in order to undo what has been done.

Brenda Spence, the nutritionist for the Madison County School System, buys and supplies six school cafeterias in Madison County. While big suppliers like Sysco offer a wide range of products and an easy system which requires only a phone call in order to receive thousands of meals, they aren't always preferable. Locally grown foods are fresher, tastier, and healthier because they do not have to be carried in trucks for

long distances—a situation which increases cost and can require use of chemical preservatives.

To date, Madison County farmers are supplying potatoes, lettuce, cabbage, cherry tomatoes, large and sliced tomatoes, squash, zucchini squash, bell peppers, watercress, cantaloupes and apples to local schools. Aubrey Raper, a Mars Hill College Sociology Instructor and one of the farmers in the group is proud to be a part of Madison Farms. “The school is a big user of produce,” he says.

Serving the school market has become a national movement for small farmers, and a growing number of state agriculture departments support Farm-to-School programs. North Carolina schools serve approximately two million students meals each day.

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