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Summit Offers Opportunity to “Connect the Dots” between Upstate and Downstate

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Among the activities recently undertaken by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets under Commissioner Richard A. Ball that offer promise to the agriculture industry in its efforts to enhance visibility among potential consumers and customers was the first-ever Farm to Table Upstate-Downstate Agriculture Summit. Held December 4, 2014, in New York City, with then-Lieutenant Governor Robert J. Duffy presiding, the goal of the event was to “explore ways of increasing access to fresh food for underserved populations and growing New York City markets’ access to upstate agricultural producers as a means of boosting in-state production and consumption,” according to the department.

Calling the connection between the state’s multi-billion-dollar upstate agricultural industry and the restaurants and marketplaces in the New York City area one of the state’s “strongest economic drivers,” Governor Andrew Cuomo said the summit was an opportunity to present “our plan to strengthen that relationship and take the state’s agriculture and tourism sectors to the next level.” Keeping the revenue generated from New York farms and tables in the state means creating more jobs and opportunities in communities across the state, he said.

Among the ideas and next steps coming out of the summit were a Regional Food Wholesale Farmers’ Market; development of a Regional Food Hub Task Force and Action Plan with “a balanced membership of stakeholders from upstate and downstate New York”; Buy NY, a new initiative that is a joint effort by the State Department of Agriculture & Markets, Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, Office of Mental Health, Department of Health, Office of General Services and Cornell Cooperative Extension to “leverage existing centralized contracts in purchasing state food products, including produce”; and a SUNY Farmers’ Market Certification Course, among others.

Opening new markets and increasing opportunities for New York State agriculture producers is a priority for the governor, according to the department, with a commitment to maximizing business between upstate producers and downstate consumers through the state’s multi-billion-dollar agriculture industry. “This is being achieved by creating new marketplaces for agriculture producers, increasing the ‘buy local’ purchasing power of state institutions and facilitating connections to spur economic growth while keeping New York food marketplace dollars in the state,” according to the state.

Of the event, Agriculture and Markets Department Commissioner Richard A. Ball said, “As farmers, we live and work just a few hours away from the largest appetite in the world in the New York

City metropolitan area. The potential for upstate farmers to harness this marketplace is limitless and we just need to connect the dots better.”

The department may do another summit and has set up a task force to keep the momentum going on this topic.

Ruth E. Thaler-Carter is an award-winning freelance writer/editor based in Rochester, NY, whose motto is “I can write about anything!”[®] She writes about marketing and other topics for a wide variety of publications and organizations, and is available for speaking engagements. She will discuss “Creating Successful Business Goals: Managing and Promoting Your Business” for the Cornell Agriculture and Food Technology Park, Geneva, New York, on September 14 as part of its Associates Program speaker series.

Note:

Below is a more detailed description of the ideas and next steps lifted from Governor Cuomo's press release, “Governor Cuomo Announces Highlights from the 2014 Farm to Table Upstate-Downstate Agriculture Summit,” December 4, 2014 (<https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-announces-highlights-2014-farm-table-upstate-downstate-agriculture-summit>).

- **Regional Food Wholesale Farmers’ Market** – The governor is committed to developing a Regional Food Wholesale Farmers’ Market, and state government will work with local and private partners to identify resources and an appropriate site. This market will enable the upstate agricultural industry to increase access to metropolitan markets for producers, while providing an array of healthy, affordable food for communities. It will also serve as an aggregation hub and processing facility to assist upstate producers and processors in targeting institutional and private sector procurement.
- **Development of a Regional Food Hub Task Force and Action Plan** – This new task force will consist of a balanced membership of stakeholders from upstate and downstate New York, including members of New York City government named by Mayor Bill de Blasio, along with members of New York State government named by Governor Andrew Cuomo. Working together, they will develop a plan to expand the distribution of regional foods to the New York City marketplace. A report will be presented to Governor Cuomo on how to expand regional food hubs across New York State within the next 90 days.
- **Food Box Expansion Program** – This program fulfills Governor Cuomo’s commitment to increasing local food access to underserved communities by dramatically expanding the already-successful food box model to upstate and downstate neighborhoods. This program will enable underserved, low-income communities to purchase New York State fresh and locally sourced fruits and vegetables. Consumers can use their SNAP benefits to pay for food boxes on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. This program will bridge the gap between farmers and consumers; farmers will benefit by selling more produce, and consumers will benefit by having access to fresh, healthy food. State funding will cover administrative costs associated with qualified and competitively chosen organizations plus procurement, transportation, distribution and nutrition education. New York State is committing \$500,000 to this initiative.
- **Buy NY** – Governor Cuomo announced the formation of a new initiative called “Buy NY,” a joint effort by the State Department of Agriculture & Markets, Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, Office of Mental Health, Department of Health, Office of General Services, and Cornell Cooperative Extension. Its purpose is to leverage existing centralized contracts regarding the purchase of state food products, including produce and dairy products. One of the initiative’s goals is to help state and local governments increase the purchase of local agriculture products in government-run institutions such as hospitals, colleges, prisons and other

facilities. The Office of General Services launched a new Buy NY website in January to provide a portal for state and local governments to learn more about purchasing New York State-produced products. It will also help educate New York agricultural producers and distributors about the state contracting system, which is available to all 62 counties and hundreds of municipalities across the state.

- **SUNY Farmers' Market Certification Course** – The state, in cooperation with the Farmers Market Federation of New York and six SUNY campuses, will develop a curriculum to improve the quality and performance of farmers' markets across the state. These courses will help market managers improve their promotion of farmers' markets and any market-based incentive programs offered at the markets.
- **Taste NY Culinary Tour** – This initiative will provide tours of upstate farms for downstate restaurateurs to cultivate stronger business-to-business relationships between the two entities.
- **Increased Outreach by the Taste NY Office in Brooklyn** – At the governor's direction, the newly formed Taste NY Office in Brooklyn will increase outreach to highly trafficked tourist attractions in New York City, with the goal of expanding economic opportunities for New York State agricultural producers.

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