



## USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack Spotlights The Common Market Southeast's Role in Empowering Small-Scale Farmers

*The Secretary's visit to the nonprofit highlighted ways the Georgia-based nonprofit food distributor is using USDA support to create new opportunities for 25 small, underserved farmers.*

**August 30, 2023 (ATLANTA, GA)** - Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, visited The Common Market Southeast's warehouse in East Point on August 23, 2023 as a part of multi-city stop to meet with Georgia producers and small businesses to champion more, new and better markets, increase competition, strengthen farm and food businesses, grow producer income, advance climate smart farming initiatives, bolster the food supply chain, and create more jobs and economic opportunities.

Vilsack shared that out of the 2.1 million farmers in the United States, only 150,000 earn more than \$500,000 annually, and control 89% of the revenue share. This leaves numerous small farmers across the nation excluded from valuable marketplace opportunities that drive growth and resilience.

During the event, Vilsack detailed the USDA's efforts to address this disparity by unveiling a comprehensive plan. The overarching objective is to create enduring opportunities for small to midsize farms to operate as viable, healthy small businesses.

Diverse investments and initiatives, including the USDA's Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA), play a crucial role in bridging these opportunities. The LFPA program supports purchases from local, regional, and underserved producers, enhancing food access for communities in need while bolstering agricultural supply chain resilience.

"USDA provided \$23 million to Georgia's LFPA program to help encourage more local purchasing among its network of food banks, which is operated in part by The Common Market [Southeast]," said Vilsack.

Currently, The Common Market Southeast's contract includes \$4 million to support purchases from its Georgia-based farms, largely representing Black- and woman-led operations. It is the designated specialty produce distribution partner for the LFPA program, delivering locally grown,

fruits, vegetables, dairy, nuts and other fresh offerings from historically underserved producers directly to the eight food banks serving the state of Georgia.

Bill Green, Executive Director of The Common Market Southeast, emphasized the significance of the referenced programs. "For many of the farmers we serve at The Common Market, these programs are transformative," he said. "Historically underserved farmers have long been excluded from wholesale opportunities. Now, these farms are empowered to participate."

The Common Market Southeast sees the LFPA program as a launching pad for its farmers. Through the LFPA program, the organization has been able to support and scale up farms like Starlit Roots Farms, an organic vegetable farm in Keysville, Georgia, which is owned and operated by Tianna Rose Neal.

"Working with The Common Market [Southeast] through LFPA opened up a new door for me," said Neal, whose farm only served local markets previously. "I always thought wholesale production seemed out of reach for a small farmer like myself."

Beyond market exposure and increased production for farms like Starlit Roots, The Common Market Southeast also provides its farm partners with upfront payments, training, and logistics support. These measures prepare them to meet institutional market demands.

The program has enabled The Common Market Southeast to purchase from a small network of socially disadvantaged farms across Georgia, with a goal of impacting up to 25 farmers and producers. The next phase, which falls in line with the USDA's plans of creating increased efficiency from farm to institutions, is finding viable institutional markets within the region's schools and hospitals.

Regional institutions are taking the lead by committing to advance purchases from this network of farmers, particularly prioritizing those operated by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). This forward purchasing approach guarantees farmers a customer for their harvests upfront, mitigating risk and fostering the confidence required for these operations to expand.

Aramark's Southeast-based higher education sites are among the early champions for forward purchasing commitments in the region.

"Our goals in purchasing with BIPOC farmers are to increase the number of BIPOC growers participating in the institutional food system, increase the amount of dollars spent on goods from BIPOC farmers, build a market for culturally diverse ingredients, and to educate ourselves on the importance of supporting historically marginalized growers," said Christopher Drayton, District Manager of Collegiate Hospitality with Aramark, who attended the event on August 23.

So far this year, approximately 12 area colleges, universities and healthcare sites have committed to nearly \$19,000 in annual sales to Starlit Roots. Although these initial purchases might be seen as modest within the framework of traditional global food production norms, they

mark a significant achievement for the young, Black-owned farm as they represent its first confirmed sales within institutional markets. These institutions have committed almost \$200,000 in total to the Southeast's grower network to date.

"Building opportunities through the LFPA program for farms like Starlit Roots so they can supply to major buyers like Aramark is how we move the needle on creating more economic opportunities for small to midsize farms," added Green. "They are the backbone of their local communities and it's important they thrive and succeed as any small business should."

To learn more about The Common Market and its efforts, visit [www.thecommonmarket.org](http://www.thecommonmarket.org)

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### **About The Common Market**

The Common Market is a nonprofit local food distributor with a mission to build vibrant and sustainable regional food systems that strengthen the health and wealth of all people. Founded in 2008, The Common Market has connected family farmers to institutions and the communities they serve for well over a decade in the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast regions, and Texas. In 2016, the organization expanded into the Southeast, calling East Point, Georgia home. Across its three regions, The Common Market has partnered with more than 300 sustainable family farms to deliver over 58 million meals worth of food to communities. To learn more, visit [www.thecommonmarket.org](http://www.thecommonmarket.org).