



\$5 million wanted to get more local produce in schools

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DENVER- A "farm-to-school" bill making its way through the state legislature would create a grant program for small Colorado farmers to apply for. The grant would help these farmers meet school food safety standards that some say are set too high for small produce producers to meet. In turn, those farmers would be able to sell fresh, local produce to Colorado schools.

HB 15-1088 asks for \$5 million from the state's general fund over the next five years. It's been crafted by a task force made up of farmers and school nutrition directors. The bill was introduced by State Rep. Faith Winter (D-Westminster).

Colorado farmers could ask for up to \$30,000 dollars in order to meet strict school food safety standards. Isabelle Farm in Lafayette is already finding ways to sell to the Boulder Valley School District.

"They buy in huge quantities. So we are talking a thousand pounds of spinach a week for four weeks. And they will commit to us in advance," said Isabelle Farm owner Natalie Condon.

Condon says it took years of research and lots of money to make sure they were meeting strict school food safety standards. She purchased a \$30,000 walk-in refrigerator, invested in hand washing stations, and got the licenses she needed to pass health inspections.

"Just the stainless steel sinks, and the hoses you need, the food safe hoses, everything else. Those alone will cost you thousands of dollars," Condon said.

Denver Public School says they'll benefit from the grant program. Theresa Hafner is the executive director of food services for the district. She says this gives her district the opportunity to support local businesses at a cost that makes sense.

"More farmers will want to do business with us, more farmers will want to provide us with local grown produce because they will have some financial resources to offset the costs of on-farm food safety or maybe season extension practices. Usually they pass that cost on to us which makes it difficult to work with," Hafner said.

She says the food is more nutritious, and is more appealing to the eye when it doesn't travel from different states. Grants would also help farmers extend their growing season through equipment, allowing for more local produce to go to the schools at times they otherwise might not be available.

"We want to support local industry but there is also a sustainability initiative that is part of this too. We have a smaller carbon footprint if the food doesn't have to travel so far," Hafner said.

When the bill was heard by the house education committee in February, Republicans said they liked some of the ideas in the bill but weren't all on board with the spending. State representative Paul Lundeen of Monument isn't convinced \$5 million dollars should be spent this way.

"Elements of it are a really good idea but I'm not convinced we need to inject the state further into the situation. What became apparent is that small farmers are already providing to schools in Colorado and found a way to meet those requirements," Lundeen said.

The bill is awaiting assignment to the house appropriations committee.

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