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The USDA Farm to School Census is a critical tool for supporting farmers and school nutrition operators and I sincerely hope that USDA honors its commitment to conduct the Census in 2027. As the Co-Director of a statewide farm to school organization, Massachusetts Farm to School, we regularly use Census data to understand trends in farm to school activity, to tailor our technical support for farmers and school nutrition operators, and to communicate to state policymakers and others about how to grow the farm to school movement.

The Census is the only nationally representative data available on farm to school participation and activities in the United States. It can provide farmers, ranchers and fishermen with important insight into schools that are interested in local purchasing, and what they may want to buy. This kind of local market information is a useful resource to help producers reach appropriately scaled market opportunities;

It can help state and federal policymakers understand the type, reach, and scale of innovative farm to school programs taking place, and how policies can best support this work;

Child nutrition programs have the opportunity to maximize the impact of government funds by including farm to school activities, and this data helps understand how child nutrition program operators are doing so.

Our State Agency of Education also relies on Census data to understand not only child nutrition program practices but additional education practices such as use of school gardens. While we appreciate the agency being mindful of the burden that data collection puts on SFAs, this information is being sought from those that already participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). The Census directly helps understand how NSLP operation can best meet its program goals of child health and support for American producers.