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The USDA Farm to School Census is a critical tool for Oregon, and our web of state agency partners, food producers, school district nutrition services, early care and education providers, university extension services, and non-profit organizations. We strongly support and are counting on the continued collection of the USDA Farm to School Census in 2027 and beyond.

As a program evaluator and data analyst, I support these farm to school actors in accessing, using, and making decisions using USDA Farm to School Census data. I have also acted in an advisory role to the USDA during the previous round of USDA Farm to School Census review and updates, and find the quality of the data to be higher than ever.

The Census is the only national dataset on farm to school activities, showing how schools buy local produce, garden, and educate about food. This dataset has changed the ability of food system actors to contribute to market development and market access for small and mid-sized food producers, and for school districts and states to benchmark their progress. These efforts strengthen school nutrition, reduce the prevalence of ultra-processed foods in school, and connect communities with producers.

As described by other organizations, the Census supports food systems by providing:

1. Market insights: Identifies schools buying local produce and encourages growth in local purchasing, helping farmers tap scalable markets.
2. Policy guidance: Shows the reach of farm to school initiatives, aiding policymakers in crafting supportive policies and eliminating programs that are not cost effective.
3. Nutrition program impact: Documents and supports how schools use National School Lunch Program (NSLP) funds for farm to school, boosting child health and local economies and improving NSLP operations and meal quality.

In Oregon, the practical utility of the Census is high, as we have used it to:

1. Assess historic progress and gaps in our farm to school food system, and provide outreach and technical assistance to food producers and school district nutrition services accordingly.
2. Set new statewide goals and strategies through a USDA funded strategic planning process that engaged hundreds of people. After approximately two years, this plan is now complete and about to be launched.
3. Set indicators of progress for the next ten years, heavily based on Census data points.
4. Reduce state data collection burdens, as we rely on the Census data and have thus been able to reduce other state-level data collection. The Census historically has a very high response rate between 60 and 70%, and Oregon's recent response rate was nearly 90% of all School Food Authorities.
5. We also find that the federal collection has a higher response rate, which leads to not only greater efficiency but also more complete and effective datasets.
6. Benchmark work in our state against other states and our region, which would not be the case if states were collecting data independently.

We strongly urge the USDA to continue prioritizing and expanding the Farm to School Census as an essential resource.