



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **CLEDA-USDA kick off National Farmers Market Week**

The Central Louisiana Economic Development Alliance and United States Department of Agriculture will kick off National Farmers Week with a celebration Saturday, Aug. 6, that includes a soil health demonstration, live music and vendors selling locally grown produce. The two agencies also will announce their plans to continue working together to strengthen the region's agricultural economy.

USDA Agricultural Marketing Service Administrator Elanor Starmer will kick off the celebration at 9:30 a.m. at Inglewood Farm. Each child who attends the event will receive a \$5 token they can use to purchase fruits, veggies and healthy snacks from the vendors.

Communities from across the country will celebrate local farmers markets during National Farmers Week, Aug. 7-13. Farmers markets serve as anchors across American communities, positively influencing community health and wealth. According to the USDA, these grassroots venues result in more viable regional economies and local farm businesses, increased access to fresh, nutritious food and stronger social networks that help keep communities healthy.

The list of farmers markets in Central Louisiana continues to grow as a result of the local foods movement. Farmers markets are thriving in Alexandria, Colfax, Pineville, Leesville, Natchitoches and other communities in the region. A full list of farmers markets can be found at [freshcentral.org](http://freshcentral.org).

"National Farmers Market Week is a great opportunity to celebrate and recognize the great benefits farmers markets bring to local communities. Farmers markets also create marketing opportunities and earning potential for farmers and ranchers that expand the local economy," said Starmer. "On top of these benefits, farmers markets are the gathering place where you can get to know your farmer."

CLEDA President Jim Clinton said, "We are proud of the growth of farmers markets in Central Louisiana. These markets help our farmers by giving them another place to sell their produce locally, and they also increase the availability of fresh, healthy produce for our residents."

During the kickoff celebration, CLEDA and four agencies under the umbrella of the USDA will sign a memorandum of agreement that signifies their commitment to continue working together to grow and sustain the local food economy. The partnership between CLEDA and the USDA offices of Agricultural Marketing Service, the Farm Service Agency, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Rural Development Agency also signifies the USDA's recognition of CLEDA as a leader in the local foods movement.

This agreement is also a testament to the work of the Central Louisiana Local Foods Initiative, a community effort that aims to strengthen Central Louisiana's local foods economy while increasing

access to fresh foods for all residents of the region. The initiative was created in 2012 with a Challenge for a Healthier Louisiana Grant from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation of Louisiana and matching funding from The Rapides Foundation. The Initiative is currently supported by funding from The Rapides Foundation as well as a philanthropic investment from Keller Enterprises, LLC

“We are excited to be officially forming this partnership with the USDA, and it’s only fitting that we do this at the beginning of National Farmers Week,” said John Cotton Dean, CLEDA’s Director of Regional Innovation.

The goal of the agreement is to encourage strong local-level partnerships within the 10 parishes of Central Louisiana, as well as to strengthen the cooperation among CLEDA and the USDA in their shared commitment of bolstering the local food economy. The agreement is the culmination of a strong working relationship between the two agencies, Dean said.

Dean envisions the two agencies hosting more workshops and events together, and continuing to identify programs and funding opportunities for farmers across Central Louisiana.

Kevin Norton, State Conservationist for USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service in Louisiana, said the USDA and CLEDA are committed “to collaborate on projects and expand our outreach efforts with beginning and small farmers throughout Central Louisiana.”

For more information about the Aug. 6 event, contact Dean at 318-441-3424 or visit [FreshCentral.org](http://FreshCentral.org).

***The Central Louisiana Economic Development Alliance (CLEDA)*** is an organization which consists of the economic development entities from the parishes (counties) of Allen, Avoyelles, Catahoula, Concordia, Grant, LaSalle, Natchitoches, Rapides, Vernon and Winn. The mission of the Central Louisiana Economic Development Alliance is to help people prosper in vibrant, thriving communities.

***The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana Foundation*** is building a healthier Louisiana through community outreach and charitable giving. In addition to the Challenge for a Healthier Louisiana, the Foundation has two signature programs: The Angel Award®, an annual recognition of outstanding Louisiana volunteers who improve the quality of life for at-risk children, and Smart Bodies®, a school-based program to prevent childhood obesity. Blue Cross also contributes nearly \$2 million annually to various nonprofit organizations throughout the state that contribute to health, education and the overall quality of life in Louisiana communities. The Foundation is funded solely through Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana.

***The Rapides Foundation*** is a philanthropic organization that develops initiatives and provides grants to organizations that share the Foundation’s mission to improve the health status of Central Louisiana. The Foundation’s service area consists of Allen, Avoyelles, Catahoula, Grant, LaSalle, Natchitoches, Rapides, Vernon and Winn parishes.

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