

By Congressman David Price in Hillsborough, N.C. -

Good Afternoon! Thank you all for being here today for the grand opening ceremony of the Piedmont Food and Agricultural Processing Center. I would like to acknowledge all of the donors to this exciting facility, and the work of the four-county Steering Committee, ably lead by Orange County's Barry Jacobs.

Over the past decade, our awareness about the food we eat has grown tremendously. We think more carefully about where our food comes from, how it's grown, and the way in which it is produced. You can see the evidence of this through the ever-growing numbers of farmers markets in the Triangle and around the country, the restaurants that tout locally grown ingredients, and new neighborhood gardens across the region. Over the last decade, growth in direct-to-consumer sales has far outpaced total agricultural sales, increasing by nearly 70 percent in the state of North Carolina.

I have been proud to support federal investments in the changing face of agriculture, including funding for efforts to make farmer's markets more accessible to low-income communities and programs to help farmers transition to new, more sustainable crops and farming methods. I was thus pleased to help secure \$237,000 for this regional processing center as an Economic Development Initiative (EDI) in Fiscal Year 2009's Transportation and Housing Appropriations bill.

The appropriations process has helped bring locally produced agriculture to the hearts of many of our cities and towns through similar EDIs for our local farmers' markets, for example in Durham and Hillsborough. And these EDIs have done exactly what they are designed to do: help stimulate economic development through sales of fresh goods while encouraging visitors to buy from other nearby retailers in towns. Over the last ten years, the number of farmers in North Carolina's Fourth District has actually increased in response to strong demand and improved local infrastructure.

The Piedmont Food and Agricultural Processing Center can serve the same important function and show how a relatively small federal investment can spark a multiplier effect that has an impact well beyond its dollar amount.

This processing center will provide a clean, safe, well-equipped space where food and produce can be cleaned and packed and food-based entrepreneurs can develop their businesses. Especially in challenging economic times, it is important to support small farmers and food entrepreneurs so they can maintain a competitive advantage in promising emerging markets. Strong local food systems and agricultural infrastructure make our local economy more resilient and help insulate us from larger shifts in the economy.

But the scope and contribution of this center reaches beyond the business of food. Eating locally produced food is also important for teaching future generations about healthy eating.

We know that when children are engaged in the food they eat – whether they grew it in their school garden or talked to the farmer who grew it – they are more likely to make healthy choices. I don't have to tell any of you about the dangerous obesity epidemic in our country, but I know that centers like this one, that emphasize community engagement with food are part of preventing childhood obesity – and are thus a key part of bringing down our nation's health care costs in addition to improving the wellbeing of individual families.

Additionally, promoting local agriculture goes beyond better choices for the consumer. It provides extra incentive for small farmers to maintain traditional family farms or start new farming operations, helps preserve open space, and protects our environment. The 22-county area that the Center will serve includes a tier of urbanizing counties in which agriculture faces severe pressures and prime farmland is being lost at a rapid rate. By providing entrepreneurial opportunities for farmers, this Center will offer incentive for farmland preservation across the region, improving our environment, our local economy, and maintaining the quality of life we all enjoy.

Today's occasion is great news for producers, farmers, food entrepreneurs and for our community and region as a whole. I thank you all for being here today as we cut the ribbon on the Piedmont Food and Agricultural Processing Center!