

Editorial: Local food efforts making more progress

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West Virginians buy a lot of food.

We just don't buy much food grown or produced in West Virginia.

Mainstream supermarket and restaurant chains depend on high volume national suppliers, and that is not an easy market for local farmers to crack. But in recent years, state officials have been talking more about what they can do to help state farmers connect with new markets. It was a key issue in the 2012 race for Agriculture Commissioner, and it is nice to report that the winner in that race is making some progress on the issue.

State Agriculture Commissioner Walt Helmick this week launched a "Farm to School" program at Preston High School in Kingwood with a lunch of West Virginia produced meat, vegetables and fruit. But the bigger goal is for Preston High to have local food on the menu throughout the school year.

That is not as easy as it sounds. The schools in Preston County, and others in our region and across the state, have been able to "buy local" on some produce, during some seasons of the year. Too often, however, local farm production is too small or too inconsistent to meet the regular needs of a school district. So building that connection will take some coordination.

For example, the Preston schools buys about \$11,000 worth of lettuce a year, and some farmers in the county will be trying new growing techniques so they can produce lettuce for more months of the year. Helping to match up those market needs with the farm production is something the state agriculture and education departments will be working on.

Meanwhile, a local and state coalition will be working toward a similar goal with the Huntington Local Foods Expo on Oct. 23 at the Big Sandy Superstore Arena Conference Center. The event is designed to link regional food growers, producers and processors with buyers from restaurants, grocery stores, schools and other venues.

Sponsored by the Huntington 30 Mile Meal group and the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition, the expo will feature a showcase of local foods as well as information for farmers on the business side of taking their crops to market. A "buyer-grower" directory also is in the works with information about what buyers need and what growers are producing.

Making the local food connection won't happen overnight, but both the school initiative and the expo are important steps in the right direction.
