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Secretary of Agriculture: Agriculture is Changing the Trajectory for Pennsylvania's Urban Spaces

Harrisburg, PA – From Reading to Lancaster on Monday, Pittsburgh on Tuesday, and Philadelphia on Thursday, Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding traveled Pennsylvania this week to visit the urban agriculture operations that are directly addressing food insecurity, improving quality of life, and infusing revenue into cities across the commonwealth.

"This week I had the incredible opportunity to travel the state and meet inspirational people who saw a connection between agriculture and art, agriculture and science, agriculture and food, and agriculture and humanity," said Redding. "Agriculture has the power to transform – to bring communities together and bring all walks of life to the same table."

"Every Pennsylvanian – regardless of zip code, or citizenship, or nationality – deserves access to fresh and nutritious food. We are all created equally, but our access to food is not. Urban agriculture is changing that by bridging the divide for those who have had no access for too long. Urban agriculture is planting seeds of hope for a prosperous future."



Tiana Lopez, garden manager at GoggleWorks Center for the Arts, shared with Redding and Monday's tour attendees her goals to transform a vacant alley into a space for hyperlocal food production and agriculture education. Download this photo and more [here](#).

In Berks County in the City of Reading, Redding was joined by Senator Judy Schwank, Representative Eddie Day Pashinski, Representative Manuel Guzman, Representative Mark Gillen, and Mayor Eddie Moran at GoggleWorks Center for the Arts. Recipient of a \$10,000 Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Grant, GoggleWorks aims to use the art of agriculture to change the lives of those who live in the little-known food desert in Reading by transforming an alley with raised beds that will grow food for local families in need and provide hands-on opportunities for area youth. In Reading, this project will complete the circle of what children need to learn and grow.

"Investing in and expanding access to healthy, nutritious food is crucial in uplifting those struggling with food insecurity in Lehigh and Berks counties," said Representative Manuel Guzman. "Our communities of color are impacted the most by this frustrating epidemic, and frankly, it is unacceptable that individuals in this country, including children, go to bed on an empty stomach. These additional investments are a step in the right direction to providing a gateway to food sustainability for these underserved communities."



Hawa Lassanah, DECA City Farms, tends to her organic garden beds during Monday's Urban Ag Tour with Secretary Redding. Download this photo and more [here](#).

In Lancaster County, Hawa Lassanah shared the story of how she saw ever-growing need in her community throughout the pandemic that inspired her to start a backyard gardening cooperative that has grown to be DECA City Farms. In addition to coordinating the harvests from Lancaster-city backyard gardeners, Lassanah manages three plots at Lancaster Central Park – all of which support their member-based CSA program and a market stand with a “pay as you can” model to meet community food needs. She looks forward to applying for the Urban

Agriculture Infrastructure Grant Program this fall to increase the scale of her operation and further grow urban agriculture infrastructure for Lancaster City.

“When people think of farming in Pennsylvania, images of rolling waves of tall cornstalks or cattle grazing in acres of lush pastureland often come to mind. We certainly have those here, but to our benefit Pennsylvania agriculture is extremely diverse,” said Chair of the Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee Senator Elder Vogel. “We also have alpaca farms and mushroom mines and some of our greatest community assets are the small urban gardens across the commonwealth. In plots on rooftops and in lots along parks and streets, Pennsylvania’s urban farmers raise fresh and nutritious foods and – perhaps most importantly – teach others the importance of agriculture. These tours provided an excellent opportunity to shine a spotlight on just a few of these community treasures.”



Rafael Vencio talks with Redding in his plot at Hilltop Urban Farm in Pittsburgh during Tuesday’s tour. Download this photo and more [here](#).

In Pittsburgh at Hilltop Urban Farm, one of the largest urban farms in the country, Redding was joined by Representative Emily Kinkead and Representative Jessica Benham. There, Rafael Vencio, who immigrated from the Philippines, shared how he uses his plot at Hilltop Urban Farm to grow agricultural products traditional to his home country such as gourds, kangkong, and alugbati. Rafael is using urban agriculture to tackle his dreams from the ground up with a goal of opening a small Filipino American eatery. Hilltop Urban Farm received two Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Grants – one for \$15,000 in 2019 and another for \$2,500 in 2020 – and works to strengthen the community with improved access to fresh and local food and generate entrepreneurial opportunities for residents like Rafael.

“Most people may be surprised to learn that farming isn’t just a rural activity,” said state Representative Emily Kinkead, democratic member of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs

Committee. “Urban farming is a very critical component to addressing and combatting food insecurity and food deserts, which exist both in my district and across Pennsylvania. It’s vital that we support this growing segment of our agriculture industry and encourage more urban communities to play a role.”



Quentin Walker-Matthews, 13, left, and Anthony Hampton, 12, center, and Zuhri Potter, 12, right, Boys Latin Charter Middle School students, tend to their plants. Download this photo and more [here](#).

In Philadelphia the Pinnwheel Group, which works to provide academic, social, and career development opportunities with a STEM-based approach, is using a \$27,500 Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Grant to grow opportunities for children at the Boys Latin Charter Middle School. At the tour of the teaching garden, Redding was joined by champions for the Pennsylvania Farm Bill and driving forces for change in the community Representatives Chris Rabb, Darisha Parker, Amen Brown, and Morgan Cephas. Andre Sawyer, master grant writer for the project, shared how the funding provided them an opportunity to provide each middle school student with their own micro-pod of plants, which they’re paid to care for and cultivate. The project is working to change children’s perceptions that food comes from a can or store by offering hands-on opportunities to cultivate and harvest their own products, while simultaneously offering economic drivers and social development opportunities to prepare them for life.

“We are blessed in Pennsylvania to have our own comprehensive package of legislation to support our food system – everything from promoting small scale producers, to growing infrastructure, addressing food insecurity, and growing the next generation of an agricultural workforce – we have support for all of this thanks to the foresight of Governor Wolf,” added Redding. “While the pandemic turned markets upside down and left food deserts even more isolated in many states, Pennsylvania had a head start with investments from the Pennsylvania Farm Bill that have been addressing the weaknesses and threats to the food system.”

Over the past two years, the Wolf Administration has invested \$1 million in urban agriculture through the Pennsylvania Farm Bill's Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Program. That \$1 million investment has leveraged an additional \$1 million in local investments through matching dollars. In total, 70 projects have been funded in 16 counties across the state. ([2019-20 funded](#), [2020-21 funded](#))

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is currently accepting applications to its \$4 million grant program for [development of urban agriculture and innovative production](#) projects. USDA is accepting grant applications on [Grants.gov](#) until 11:59 p.m. EST on July 30, 2021.

The \$500,000 2021-22 Pennsylvania Farm Bill [Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Program](#) will open for application early this fall.

To learn more about the Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Program that's growing and nourishing Pennsylvania's cities, visit [agriculture.pa.gov/pafarmbill](#).

Note: Photo and video of the tours will be available at [PACast.com](#). High-resolution photos and captions from the full week of tours are available on [Flickr](#).

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