



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®
OF FLORIDA

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PRESS RELEASE: Statewide Candidate Forum for Florida Commissioner of Agriculture

Media/Public Invited

The Florida Association of Community Farmers Markets is sponsoring a candidate forum at the 2nd Annual Small and Alternative Farm Conference in Kissimmee on Saturday, July 31, 2010. The forum is being moderated by the **League of Women Voters of Florida** and is supported by Slow Food chapters throughout Florida and the Florida Food Policy Network. The event will begin at 6:30pm at the Silver Spurs Exhibition Hall at the Osceola Heritage Park. There is no admission charge. Media and public are invited.

Three of the four qualified candidates have been confirmed: Mr. Thad Hamilton, Mr. Scott Maddox, and Mr. Adam Putnam. Mr. Ira Chester is unavailable.

The Commissioner of Agriculture plays a key role in the leadership and management of one of Florida's main sources of revenue and jobs: farming. With locally grown products as one of the hottest national trends in food, this forum will focus on the vision, goals and ideas of the future Commissioner, with a particular focus on the future of small independent farms. Open to the public, this event will include independent farmers and consumers of locally grown produce and food across the state.



John Matthews, president of the Fl. Assoc of Community Farmers Markets says, "Florida's independent growers are responding to a hugely popular national trend of households 'buying and eating local food', to ensure more healthful, fresh, and affordable meals. This forum will give our grower, buyers, and consumers a chance to hear the goals, visions and ideas of our future Agriculture Commissioner."

Deirdre Macnab, President of the League of Women Voters of Florida, noting the

significance of agricultural production in Florida's economy said, "With the number of state races this year, these kinds of candidate forums are critical to help voters be informed as they cast their votes in this pivotal year for Florida's future."

BACKGROUND:

In this age of international and the growing industrialization of food production, with preservatives and additives, genetically altered crops and *E. coli* outbreaks, people are increasingly concerned about the quality and cleanliness of the foods they eat. Given the impossibility of identifying the pesticides used and the route taken to grow and transport, say, a banana from Central America to our local supermarket, foods grown locally make a lot of sense for those who want more control over what they put into their bodies.

The vast majority of Florida's nearly 47,463 farms are classified as small farms. Calculated on an area or on an economic basis, nearly 90% of all Florida farms are small farms. Florida is unique in that there was an 8% increase in farm numbers from 2002 to 2007, essentially all in the small farm category. Research shows that nationwide nearly half of consumers purchased organic foods within the past six months with fruits and vegetables heading up the largest category, but with an increasing large proportion coming from the dairy case. Meat and poultry also appear to have the next most potential because consumers are growing increasingly concerned about BSE, E coli and the presence of growth hormones and antibiotics in their meat.

The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture reports that the average fresh food item on our dinner table travels 1,500 miles to get there. Buying locally produced food eliminates the need for all that fuel-guzzling transportation.

Another benefit of eating locally is helping the local economy. Farmers on average receive only 20 cents of each food dollar spent, some studies show, with the rest going for transportation, processing, packaging, refrigeration and marketing. Farmers who sell food to local customers "receive the full retail value, a dollar for each food dollar spent," he says. Additionally, eating locally encourages the use of local farmland for farming, thus keeping development in check while preserving open space.

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