



Opening Statement of Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich)
Healthy Food Initiatives, Local Production, and Nutrition
March 7, 2012

As prepared for delivery

Good morning and thank you all for being here - during Ag Week! - as we continue our hearings on the 2012 Farm Bill.

Today, we will focus on the increasing demand for locally-grown food, and the opportunities that creates for farmers and ranchers across the country. We'll also take a look at how we can strengthen access to healthy food options for communities in need.

When I go home to Michigan on the weekends, I love seeing the Michigan-made produce in the supermarket. We have everything from apples, cherries, blueberries, sweet corn, hot dogs and sausages, more kinds of vegetables than I can count, and a growing selection of Michigan-made beer and wine. Michigan State University recently partnered with Meijer stores to promote "Made in Michigan" products in the grocery aisles, including locally-grown produce and value-added products like salsas, jams, and spaghetti sauces. We're seeing more "Michigan-Made" signs in grocery stores all across the state, and it's a trend I want to see continue.

Whether a Kansas farmer is growing wheat that will be made into bread in a Kansas bakery, or selling Georgia peaches to schools through a food hub in Atlanta, local food systems mean a win-win for agriculture and the local economy. And those are big wins: In Michigan we know that if every household spent just \$10 spent on locally-grown food, we could put \$40 million back into the economy. When we buy local, we support local jobs.

The growing demand for local food has also created great opportunities for young and beginning farmers. Through farmers markets and food hubs, new farmers are getting help marketing, aggregating and processing their products.

We also know how important local food systems have been in this difficult economy. Food policy councils, farmers markets, co-ops, and food hubs are bringing farmers together with low-income school districts, food banks, and grocers in food deserts to provide fruits, vegetables and other healthy products to families in need.

This isn't always an easy task. Resources like Healthy Food Financing can help bridge the gap, and have helped new grocers get established in places like Philadelphia and Detroit. These stores are making profits, meeting an important need in local communities, and using food hubs to connect with local farmers.

We know that too often, parents who are juggling multiple jobs and working long hours find it difficult to prepare healthy meals for their kids. That's why the Nutrition Education efforts, coupled with incentives to buy healthy, nutritious foods, are so important for communities in need.

The sad irony is that as the economy declined and so many people lost their jobs, there was more need for food assistance and community food banks; but at the same time, fewer people had the resources to make donations to the organizations that could help. They were squeezed on both sides, but through innovation and creative partnerships, farmers and local food systems are helping to bridge the gap.

One of our very first hearings focused on accountability – stretching every dollar to get the best results, eliminating duplication, cutting red tape, and getting better results for everyone. That is still the lens through which I view the Farm Bill. Local food programs represent a very small percentage of the bill, but they make a very big impact in our communities, creating jobs and improving access to locally-grown foods.

The continued success of the agricultural economy and the continued growth of jobs in agriculture require both traditional production and local efforts. America's farmers aren't just feeding the world; they're also feeding their neighbors and their local community. Local food efforts are leveraging private dollars to create more economic opportunity in rural communities and more choices for consumers.

I want to thank all of our excellent witnesses here today, not only for your testimony, but for the important work you are doing to make local food efforts work in our communities.

I now turn to Senator Roberts for his opening statement.