

At Colchester's Malletts Bay School on Monday, Rep. Peter Welch unveiled new legislation he wrote to help Vermont schools provide students with fresh and local produce during school meals.

Alongside agriculture and education officials, Welch outlined the Fresh and Local Food for Schools Act (H.R. 5812), which would allow states like Vermont to use federal funds to buy local produce. The pilot program could help Vermont direct \$90,000 in federal support to local agriculture, instead of nation-wide commodity programs.

"Serving high-quality, fresh and local produce in schools not only improves the nutritional value of school meals, but it also teaches young people the importance of healthy eating," Welch said. "This bill will make students healthier, support Vermont farmers and invest in our local economy."

Welch's bill would make changes to the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, which provides \$50 million a year in produce to schools across the country. Created in 1994 to utilize the DOD's existing food distribution process, the program – a partnership between the DOD and the U.S. Department of Agriculture – now provides inadequate commodities to Vermont from a regional distribution center in Rhode Island.

H.R. 5812 would create a three-state pilot program that would allow participants to opt-out of the DOD program and spend those funds instead on local fruits and vegetables.

The legislation builds on efforts launched by Sen. Patrick Leahy to improve the quality of school lunches while also stimulating local and regional small and medium-sized farms and food distribution networks.

Dana Hudson, Northeast Regional Lead for National Farm to School Network, hailed the new bill during Monday's press conference.

"This legislation is important for not only Vermont schools, but Vermont farmers. It starts to break down barriers that hinder the purchase of Vermont fruits and vegetables," Hudson said. "So many schools are already trying to work with local farmers. Congressman Welch's bill is a wonderful way to strengthen those relationships"

Also joining Welch Monday were Secretary of Agriculture Roger Allbee, Malletts Bay School Food Service Director Steve Davis and Vermont farmers Thomas Case and Sona Desai.