

[By Dawson Raspuzzi](#)

Vermont Rep. Peter Welch introduced legislation Tuesday to help the state's farmers, many of whom lost significant crops due to Tropical Storm Irene, and bring more nutritious, fresh produce to school cafeterias.

The bill would re-allocate federal dollars states receive to spend on produce from large distribution centers under the Department of Defense's Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. The program -- a joint partnership between the DOD and Department of Agriculture -- was created in 1994 and uses the DOD's existing food distribution network.

Under Welch's Fresh and Local School Foods Act, states would be allowed to spend their allotted amount on fruits and vegetables from local farms. In Vermont, schools receive a combined \$90,000 to spend on produce -- most of which is canned -- obtained from a center in Rhode Island.

Three states would pilot the program, under the proposed bill, by opting out of the DOD program.

The drafted legislation was the result in tours Vermont's Democratic congressmen took of communities across the state to take in Irene's effect. "Vermont farmers and a lot of the folks at local schools really led the way" in what is included in the bill, he said.

"This is a Vermont-generated idea," Welch said. "Many of our local farmers were smashed with Irene. They lost not only their crops but in some cases their farm land, and our goal is to do everything we can to help them get on their feet and farm another day."

Because much of what schools purchase from the distribution center is canned produce, Welch said Vermont farmers benefit little from it. His bill, he said, would give the state an opportunity to boost its economy and help farmers, all while improving the nutritional offerings at schools.

It would be up to states to come up with a plan on how the food is distributed.

"Those practical issues of how do you get that food and how do you serve it would be largely solved at the local level," Welch said.

In Vermont, it may not be as difficult as in some states because many schools already participate in a local produce programs such as Farm to School, including Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union's nine schools.

Maureen O'Neil, director of SVSU's food service provider, The Abbey Group, has promoted fresh produce in the schools since beginning at the Abby Group two years ago. Many of the vegetables and fruits students The Abbey Group serves is grown on nearby farms, including a vegetable garden behind Mount Anthony Union Middle School that students help maintain through school programs.

O'Neil sees the bill as an opportunity to increase the amount of locally grown produce on lunch menus, which she said ultimately leads to more nutritious meals for children.

"I think it would be great. I really think it would be a positive thing for us," she said.

There are times SVSU purchases "fresh" produce, such as pears, from the Rhode Island distribution center instead of canned produce. The biggest drawback, O'Neil said, is that the produce is often no longer ripe by the time it arrives in Bennington.

"Often when we get it, it's not in great condition anymore," O'Neil said.