



An Opportunity to Tell Your Story – Feb. 7, 2005

One of the questions Farm Bureau representatives are often asked when pitching story ideas to the mainstream news media is: What does your story mean to consumers?

Consumers are the target audience of Farm Bureau's Food Check-Out Day campaign. The comparative affordability of food in the United States offers us a unique opportunity to reach the general public. With a focus on food affordability, this campaign provides an opportunity for positive publicity for America's farmers and ranchers.

How Does it Work?

Food Check-Out Day commemorates the calendar day when the average American will have earned enough income to pay for the entire year's food supply. For your information, the Agriculture Department's Economic Research Service chart on Food Expenditures is found at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/CPIFoodAndExpenditures/Data/table7.htm>. The official date of our national commemoration is February 7 in 2005.

Key messages:

- “Based on Agriculture Department statistics, it takes just 37 days for the average American to earn enough disposable income to pay for his or her family's food supply for the entire year.”
- “Americans enjoy the safest, most abundant and most affordable food supply on earth.”

An official national commemoration of Food Check-Out Day was first attempted in 1998 in Chicago, Ill. The effort conducted in 1998 was a test run of sorts, to gauge interest, not only of the news media, but Farm Bureau volunteers as well. Results from the initial effort were extremely positive -- so positive, in fact, that it was decided to formulate comprehensive campaigns for 1999-2003. Events were held, respectively, in Phoenix, Ariz.; Nashville, Tenn.; Philadelphia, Pa.; Las Vegas, Nev.; and New Orleans, La. After that, the event continued in 2004 in Jacksonville, Fla., and will continue in 2005 with only a few minor changes with a national event in Orange County, California.

The idea for Food Check-Out Day surfaced through the Farm Bureau Women's Committee. At the national level, AFBF will employ the speaking talents of AFB Women's Chair Terry Gilbert as national spokesperson for the event. At the state level, however, the project could be carried out by selected committees, such as Farm Bureau Women, Young Farmer & Rancher or Promotion and Education; a combination of those committees or by the entire organization.

An Opportunity to Tell Your Story (cont'd)

Supportive material in this packet is available to several leaders and staff members at each state Farm Bureau, in particular the state Farm Bureau information/public relations director, who should be consulted regarding public relations aspects of the Food Check-Out Day campaign.

The Food Check-Out Day Packet

The basic components we have produced for the Food Check-Out Day effort can be found in this folder. We have included the following material:

- Tips on contacting and working with the news media, including pointers on how to handle an interview.
- Basic information on planning your events.
- Information on working with Ronald McDonald House Charities.
- General positive talking points on American agriculture, especially in regard to food affordability.

A draft news release in Microsoft Word format for you to localize and distribute is also available. Consider using the Food Check-Out Day logo, in your state Farm Bureau publication or newspaper. Download the logo from <http://www.fb.org/newsroom/graphics.php>.

In addition, AFBF will once again make available Food Check-Out Day stickers and posters. These materials are available at the same prices as last year: 2" x 2" stickers, 200 on a roll for \$4.50; 4" x 4" stickers, 200 on a roll, for \$8; and posters, 11" x 17" for \$1.50.

Contact Brett Connelly at AFBF regarding ordering stickers and posters. He can be reached at 202-406-3654 or via e-mail at brettc@fb.org.

With your help, we can use Food Check-Out Day to take our message of safe, abundant and affordable food to the consuming public. Please keep in mind that Food Check-Out Day is not intended to overshadow the economic conditions that are facing America's farmers and ranchers today. Rather, it is a consumer-targeted message geared toward promoting the efficiency and productivity of America's farmers.

For additional information, contact your state Farm Bureau information/public relation staff or call the following American Farm Bureau staff members: Rolland Hayenga (847-969-2969 or rollandh@fb.org) or Cyndie Sirekis (202-406-3649 or cyndies@fb.org).



Other Key Messages

Food Safety

- As farmers, our job is to provide consumers with the highest quality food possible. Growing and raising wholesome, safe food is our top goal. We've done a good job; and we're going to continue to look for every opportunity to improve quality and safety.
- Federal and state governments are responsible for safeguarding the food supply, but farmers are responsible for growing food safely. We make sure we use crop protectants effectively and safely, in amounts that are no more than what is necessary to combat pests and diseases.
- We work hard to gain the knowledge, training and skill to use chemicals safely and responsibly. Many farmers learned from their parents and have a lot of experience. But like other professionals, we also go to college, attend seminars and work with consultants. We are professionals in what we do.
- Food-borne illnesses can occur anytime food is involved. So basic, sound food practices should always be followed, whether the food is being prepared at a restaurant, at home or at a church picnic.
- Proper food storage, processing and handling eliminates most, if not all, food-borne risks. Thorough cooking has proved an adequate safeguard. Food should always be promptly refrigerated. Raw meat products should be segregated from cooked products. Perhaps most important, when in doubt, throw it out.
- The basic products farmers produce are not usually the source of bacterial diseases. After the products leave the farm, however, meat, milk and other high-protein foods, on occasion, can be subject to contamination during processing, handling, storing and the actual preparation of the food.
- Food safety standards are in place by the federal government to further ensure the food we eat is safe.

Biotechnology

- The agricultural community has long supported new technologies that improve production and help make food even more affordable for consumers. For example, we've been selectively breeding animals and crops for centuries to improve disease resistance and to produce bigger yields. Biotechnology simply gives us the tools to speed up this process, and complete it with much greater precision.
- Consumers and the environment are the end beneficiaries of new advances in biotechnology. Biotech advances that come into use on the farm will further ensure that American food and fiber products can remain cost-competitive both here and abroad.
- Biotechnology research is closely monitored by federal and state agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency, Agriculture Department and the Food and Drug Administration. While it can be an effective tool, biotechnology as used on farms -- such as new corn and soybean varieties -- will not "run rampant" and produce the mutants that populate nightmares and science-fiction movies. During a biotech research project, perhaps one gene in 10,000 is manipulated to achieve a small, but desired result.

Integrated Pest Management (IPM)

- American farmers fully support practices that enable us to reduce pesticide use. We've been using IPM tactics such as field scouting and even crop rotation for years. IPM is a management practice that uses cultural practices and natural pest enemies to reduce the use of crop protectants. We'll continue to expand IPM use whenever possible.
- As business people, we're interested in lowering costs associated with using crop protectants. IPM can help us do that. IPM, however, does not mean totally eliminating the use of crop protectants. Some are even used in conjunction with modern IPM techniques.
- Farmers will continue to work with universities and researchers to develop new techniques that lessen the use and expense of crop protectants.

Pesticides

- Farmers are strongly motivated to use crop protectants responsibly. We have, first, a respect for the laws and regulations governing crop protectant use; second, a personal commitment to protect consumers, their families and the environment from reckless chemical use; and, third, an economic interest in reducing chemical costs.
- Farmers' foremost goals are to make a living growing safe, nutritious and affordable food. Growers and marketers of fresh food products are especially concerned about produce safety and consumer health.
- Federal and state agencies closely monitor levels of pesticide residues in food. Allowable limits are set hundreds, even thousands, of times lower than levels that would pose any potential health risk. The Food and Drug Administration prosecutes violations of these standards.

Other Key Messages (cont'd)

- Farmers are responsible pesticide managers. Crop protectants are expensive and farmers don't benefit from over-applying them or exceeding state and federal application guidelines.

The Environment

- Over the past decade, farmers have dramatically increased their use of conservation tillage techniques that keep crop residue such as leaves and stalks in the field. According to the Conservation Technology Information Center, conservation tillage was used on 103.1 million acres and reduced tillage on another 64.1 million acres in 2002. No till/strip till acreage grew by another 3.1 million acres since the last survey conducted in 2000. No till/strip till acreage has grown steadily since 1990 when it was at 16.9 million acres. Nearly 60 percent of the acres planted to crops in the United State are included in these types of crop residue management. This greatly reduces field runoff and keeps crop protectants where they belong -- in the field and out of streams. This helps protect water quality.
- The erosion rate by water on U.S. cropland was reduced by 24 percent between 1982 and 1997, according to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service 1997 National Resources Inventory. In 1982, 4.1 tons of soil per acre were lost to erosion per year. Today, soil lost to erosion is down to less than 3 tons per acre per year.
- Soil erosion on 23.5 million acres of highly erodible land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program has decreased by 90 percent -- to less than 1 ton per acre per year. Most soils naturally regenerate at rates of 2 to 12 tons per acre per year, according to the Soil and Water Conservation Society. A generation ago, soil erosion rates of up to 40 tons an acre were recorded during the Dust Bowl. Today's new farming methods and tillage techniques have made erosion negligible, while enriching the soil in the process.
- Farmers and ranchers produced a net increase of 131,400 acres of wetlands from 1997-2002. By 2003, farmers, ranchers and other land owners had installed 1.54 million acres of conservation buffers under a USDA initiative. As of Feb. 2004, farmers enrolled 34.6 million acres of land in the Conservation Reserve Program to protect the environment and provide habitat for wildlife.
- Today's farmers and ranchers use precise plant nutrition management plans to increase food production while producing less waste. This translates into cleaner rivers, lakes and streams across the United States. The American farmer and rancher have a stake in the future of America's natural resources. With more than 90 percent of America's farms and ranches operated by individuals or families, maintaining and improving our nation's natural resources is vital to keeping the business in the family for generations to come. Using precise plant nutrition and crop health practices and tools helps today's farmers produce more food with less seed and fewer inputs.
- A 2004 survey of America's young farmers and ranchers revealed that 52.9 percent use conservation (or no-till) tillage while 47.1 percent regularly test the soil or crop tissue prior to the application of nutrients and pesticides.



General Agriculture Facts

General Points

- More than 24 million American workers (17 percent of the total U.S. workforce) produce, process, sell and trade the nation's food and fiber. But only 4.6 million of those people live on farms -- slightly less than 2 percent of the total U.S. population.
- Farmers and ranchers receive only 19 cents out of every dollar spent on food at home and away from home. The rest goes for costs beyond the farm gate: wages and materials for production, processing, marketing, transportation and distribution. In 1980, farmers and ranchers received 31 cents.
- In 2003, \$56 billion worth of American agricultural products were exported around the world.
- More than half of America's agricultural producers intentionally provide habitat for wildlife. Deer, moose, fowl and other species have shown significant population increases during the past several years.
- Ethanol and biodiesel fuels made from corn, soybeans and other crops are beneficial to the environment and promote energy security.

Today's Farmer and Farm Family

- There are 2.13 million farms dotting America's rural landscape. About 99 percent of U.S. farms are operated by individuals, family partnerships or family corporations. And American agriculture provides jobs -- including production agriculture, farm inputs, processing and marketing, along with retail and wholesale sales -- for 17 percent of the U.S. population.
- A 2003 survey of America's young farmers and ranchers revealed that 94.1 percent planned to farm and ranch for life. And 88 percent said they would like their children to follow in their footsteps. This provides strong incentive for today's farmers and ranchers to protect and preserve the natural resources on their property. Not only is the land and its resources a farmer's lifeblood today, it represents the future for his family and its business.
- America's farmers and ranchers are true professionals. Most farmers and ranchers are trained and certified in the use of agricultural chemicals. And farmers test and evaluate the soil before administering fertilizers. Farmers and ranchers don't spend hard-earned money on costly fertilizers and nutrients unless they absolutely have to. Doing otherwise doesn't make good business sense.

Today's Modern Farm

- Thanks to modern farming techniques, America's farmers and ranchers are producing more food on fewer acres, leaving more open space for wildlife habitat. Modern farming practices free up millions of acres for wildlife to live and thrive.
- Precision farming practices boost crop yields and overall efficiency by using satellite maps and computers to match seed, fertilizer and crop protection applications to local soil conditions.
- A 2004 survey of young farmers and ranchers reveals that computers are used on 92 percent of their farms. Nearly 90 percent of today's young farmers have use cellular telephones and have access to the Internet.



The Story of Ronald McDonald House®

Background

When an unlikely partnership was formed in Philadelphia in 1974 between an NFL team, a children's hospital and a restaurant chain, none of its members could have imagined that their dream of a "home-away-from-home" for families of seriously ill children would grow to become an international phenomenon. They simply wanted to create a place where parents of sick children could be with others who understood their situations and could provide emotional support.

The seeds of the partnership were planted when Kim Hill, the 3-year-old daughter of Philadelphia Eagles tight end Fred Hill, was diagnosed with leukemia. Hill and his wife camped out on hospital chairs and benches, ate food from vending machines and did all they could to keep Kim from seeing their sadness, exhaustion and frustration.

All around them, the Hills saw other parents doing exactly the same thing. They learned that many of the families had traveled great distances to bring their children to the medical facility; but the high cost of hotel rooms was prohibitive. They continued to think, "there has to be a happy medium." Hill rallied the support of his teammates to raise funds to help other families experiencing the same emotional and financial traumas as his own. Through the Philadelphia Eagles' general manager, Jim Murray, the team offered its support to Dr. Audrey Evans, head of the pediatric oncology unit at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. It was Dr. Evans' dream for a house that could serve as temporary residence for families of children being treated at her hospital that led to the first Ronald McDonald House.

By 1979, 10 more Ronald McDonald Houses had opened. In the next five years, local communities founded 60 more Houses; 53 more opened in the next five years. Across the country and throughout the world, people viewed Ronald McDonald House as a way for a community to band together for their neighbors in need of comfort and security during a particularly difficult time.

Currently, there are nearly 240 Ronald McDonald Houses in more than 25 countries. The Houses are supported by more than 30,000 volunteers who annually donate one million hours of their time. Ronald McDonald House is the cornerstone program of Ronald McDonald House Charities. To date, RMHC's national body and its global network of local Charities have awarded more than \$400 million in grants to children's programs worldwide.

For more information, visit www.rmhc.org.



Event Planning Basics

Commemorating Food Check-Out Day through a special event will help deliver agriculture's message. It will help generate positive publicity about agriculture, dramatize the point of affordable food costs in the United States, create and maintain public goodwill toward farmers and ranchers, provide information and create greater understanding. While this packet contains a few specific ideas on how to commemorate Food Check-Out Day, what you ultimately decide to do in your state or county is entirely up to you. Following, however, are a few pointers for conducting special events that should prove helpful, no matter what form your effort takes.

First, it is important for you to choose and plan your event. Ask yourself several questions:

- What is the purpose?
- Who are your target publics?
- Do you have the time and resources to implement an effective event?
- Have you secured input and/or support from members of your state Farm Bureau staff?
- Are you familiar and comfortable with the message?

Following are some specific event planning details you should address:

- Develop a plan and put it in writing.
- Assemble a team to carry out your plan. This should include volunteer Farm Bureau members, but could also include staff involvement.
- Assemble a basic media kit that includes: background on Farm Bureau; a localized Food Check-Out Day news release; information on local agriculture; and other supportive material.
- Consider a booth with banners, handouts, posters and perhaps a giveaway item. In the past, one state Farm Bureau printed bookmarks commemorating Food Check-Out Day. This material does not have to be specific to Food Check-Out Day, but should focus on points that make the public feel good about agriculture.
- Determine a schedule for your event and invite the news media.
- Choose a location/facility for the event and contact the person in charge. If the event involves a local grocery store or a local Ronald McDonald House, contact the manager.
- Make sure your event is staffed with an adequate number of workers.
- Follow up with thank you notes to everyone who helped make your event a success.



Your RMHC Checklist

If your Food Check-Out Day celebration includes a food donation to a Ronald McDonald House in your area, here is a handy checklist to follow:

- Contact the Ronald McDonald House executive director/manager in your area to express your interest.
- Ask the Ronald McDonald House executive director/manager for a wish list of food items he/she would like to have donated to the pantry.
- Ask for the House's assistance in promoting Food Check-Out Day at any local McDonald's franchise. This could include the store's use of special promotional material.
- In advance, notify the manager of the grocery store where you will do your shopping for food items. Tell the store manager about Food Check-Out Day, your plans to purchase food items from the store for your donation, and see if the store is interested in assisting in some manner. Ask the store manager if it would be possible to borrow a shopping cart or two to help deliver the donated goods.
- Secure enough help from Farm Bureau volunteers for shopping, delivery, etc.
- Make sure you have ample vehicle space to transport the food from the store to the Ronald McDonald House.
- The news media should be invited (at a specified time) to cover the donation that takes place at the Ronald McDonald House. Hand out news releases about the donation and Food Check-Out Day.
- Identify key spokespersons for media interviews. These people should thoroughly review the talking points and other media-related material in this packet.
- Make signs for the shopping carts, or other means of delivery, that clearly indicate for the camera that the food is being donated by Farm Bureau, or is made possible by the farmer's productivity.



Ronald McDonald House Charities

Once again this year, we are working cooperatively with Ronald McDonald House Charities (RMHC), and its cornerstone program Ronald McDonald House (RMH), as a national Food Check-Out Day partner. Last year's food donations to RMHC helped make the day and event far more visible. Once again, we are pleased to extend the opportunity for you to work with RMHC in your state on similar events. How you ultimately commemorate the event remains entirely up to you, but the relationship with RMHC provides another angle for additional media coverage.

AFBF is currently working with RMHC to hold this year's national event to commemorate Food Check-Out Day. This event is planned for Feb. 7, 2005, in Orange County, California.

Before contacting the RMHC official in your area, please review background material in this packet regarding RMHC and how to effectively work with them. You may also want to:

- Work with your local Ronald McDonald House Charities executive director and/or Ronald McDonald House manager to arrange to have Ronald McDonald be part of your publicity event.
- Work with your local Ronald McDonald House Charities executive director and/or Ronald McDonald House manager on other ways to promote Food Check-Out Day with local McDonald's franchisees.

Ronald McDonald House Contacts

<http://www.rmhc.org/mission/rmhs/search/index.html>

At this web site you can search for the Ronald McDonald House in your state. You should contact the appropriate House manager in your state to seek his or her cooperation for a Food Check-Out Day event or food donation.



The Core Message

What is the basic message we want to communicate on Food Check-Out Day? The core message is: *“Food in America is affordable, thanks in large part to America’s productive farmers and ranchers.”* Food Check-Out Day allows us to back up that message, and perhaps build on it to strengthen the consumer’s image of America’s farmers and ranchers. The following Food Check-Out Day talking points can be used during public events or interviews with the news media.

- “Food Check-Out Day is a celebration of the bounty from America’s farms and ranches and how that bounty is shared with American consumers through affordable food prices.”
- “According to the latest statistics provided by the Agriculture Department, the average American devotes just 10 percent of his or her disposable personal income to pay for food.”
- “When applied to calendar days, the average American will have earned enough income to pay for his or her family’s annual food supply in just 37 days. This year we will commemorate this fact on Feb. 7.”
- “Compared to other expenses facing America’s families, food is a bargain. While Americans must only work until early February to pay for their yearly food supply, last year they had to work until April 11 to pay for their taxes.”
- “America’s farmers and ranchers are the most productive in the world. We’re proud of our contribution to society and Food Check-Out Day gives us the opportunity to share some of our success with others.”
- “As we celebrate the efficiency and productivity of America’s farmers and ranchers, we should not overlook the fact that farmers and ranchers are currently going through difficult economic times. Escalating regulatory costs and other factors are threatening the very fabric of the family farm. Prices at the supermarket certainly don’t reflect the historically low commodity prices producers have received in recent years.”
- “Producing safe, quality food is our job, and we hope that consumers take note of Food Check-Out Day and join us in this celebration of American agriculture’s success.”
- “Several different statistics on consumer food spending are available. We chose to base Food Check-Out Day on an Agriculture Department statistic that is updated yearly. We consider it the most reliable on an annual basis.”



Other Promotional Ideas

Your commemoration of Food Check-Out Day can be as detailed as you like. In addition to conducting an in-store event or making a food donation, here are a few other basic ideas for promoting Food Check-Out Day:

- Write a guest editorial for your local newspaper focusing on Food Check-Out Day. Review this how-to kit and use the media points described in it.
- Don't forget -- Food Check-Out Day is not just Feb. 7. The ability to purchase affordable food is an everyday event. Remind others of this when promoting Food Check-Out Day.
- This would be a good opportunity to request public speaking engagements with local civic groups, such as Rotary, the Lions Club, the local Chamber of Commerce, etc. To make it hit home, consider a little giveaway during the meeting that marks Food Check-Out Day.
- Work with your local mayor, or other elected officials, to secure an official proclamation for Food Check-Out Day at the local level.
- Food Check-Out Day also presents a good opportunity for visits to local classrooms. Contact the school principal or classroom teacher ahead of time to find out what is required to make a visit and have fun! You might even want to hand out some Ag in the Classroom material.

Contact a local food-processing facility about hosting a tour for local officials or school students. This would drive home the message that local farmers team up with processors to make food affordable.



In-Store Event

There are many events you can plan to make Food Check-Out Day a success. While we encourage you to work in cooperation with your state Farm Bureau information/public relations staff, following are some ideas.

A grocery store visit is just one of many events your group may want to undertake as a way to communicate the affordability of food to the American public. Below are some points to consider when planning a grocery store visit to promote Food Check-Out Day.

Grocery Store Visit

- Contact the grocery store manager to request approval and/or cooperation for an informational event. Make sure the manager knows that you are planning to invite the media.
- Additional posters and stickers commemorating the day may be ordered from AFBF. These items may be used during your in-store event. As shoppers come by, use a sticker to break the ice. Stickers can be placed on the bags of shoppers who stop to find out more about the campaign. Don't be overly aggressive, but this should provide you with an opportunity to deliver your message. (See page 2 of this packet for sticker/poster ordering and pricing information.)
- Consider setting up an in-store display about agriculture or depicting the variety of food products produced in your state. AFBF sells an agricultural (fair display) exhibit and a new patriotic display, which would make good additions to your event.
- Consider sponsoring an in-store food giveaway that includes agricultural products produced in your state and county.
- When contacting volunteers to assist with the in-store effort, make sure you have a shift change every three hours to prevent fatigue or boredom. Groups consisting of two or three people work well and make the event fun for everyone.
- Invite members of the media to help celebrate. With the manager's permission, invite them to the store, but make sure you have reviewed the talking points included in this packet.



Working With the Media

Farm Bureau's Food Check-Out Day event is an excellent way for you to take a positive message to members of the news media. It is consumer-oriented and deals directly with the cost of food -- a matter in which everyone has an interest. But, how do you get started? The first suggestion is to contact a member of your state Farm Bureau information/public relations staff. Ask for guidance. You also should find out if special material is available or special efforts are being planned.

You already know what your basic message will be: "America's farmers and ranchers are efficient producers of food and America's consumers benefit greatly from this proficiency. It takes only about 40 days (or about 10 percent of disposable personal income) for the average American family to earn sufficient income to pay for the year's food supply. Which means Americans have earned enough income by early February to pay for their annual food needs."

The story of Food Check-Out Day, especially when told at the local level, should prove newsworthy to members of your local news media. Try taking the viewpoint of the media person who must get a newspaper out, produce a television or radio news or talk show. What can you tell them about Food Check-Out Day -- and related events -- that will make their life easier? What elements make your story news? If you can take that viewpoint when contacting the media, your job of promoting Food Check-Out Day will be much easier and more productive.

Reaching the Right Reporter

At all media outlets, there are reporters covering many different beats, or areas of interest. If your story was about a garden club meeting, you obviously wouldn't want to contact the sports editor. You'll need to do some research -- something as basic as calling the station or newspaper and asking for the name of the person who covers consumer or food issues, agriculture or business. In smaller outlets, a general reporter or editor may be assigned to several areas.

To attract the most attention possible, go to the phone book. Look up broadcast stations -- radio and television. Look up publications, newspapers, magazines and even wire services. Publication mastheads often list the names of primary editors, reporters and columnists, so you may be able to get the information you need there.

The Newsroom

When you make initial contact to pitch the Food Check-Out Day story, keep in mind that newsrooms, by their very nature, are busy places. Reporters and photographers are scrambling to meet their deadlines. The most important thing is to catch their attention with your piece of news. Don't waste their time. If you already have a positive one-on-one relationship with a particular reporter, that may well be the person to approach first. If you don't know anyone at your local newspaper, or don't know where to begin, just ask for the news desk or news editor/director as a starting point. After that, provided that what you have to say sounds interesting, you'll be put through to a reporter to take full details regarding Food Check-Out Day and related events. Then it should all happen automatically.

A point to remember is that you should never ask a reporter to preview the story. Only when you pay for material are you entitled to ask to preview any printed material. It is never acceptable to ask to see the reporter's version of any story before it is printed. Reporters generally never let sources review stories, though they often check back when information is unclear to them. Remember, it's their job to gather the facts and tell the story accurately -- to suggest they can't do so without your input insults their professionalism. Besides, they won't let you, so there's little point in asking. It's better to listen carefully during an interview to be aware of when a reporter may not understand something. Remember that the likelihood of your being misquoted is reduced substantially if you speak briefly and clearly. People are usually not misquoted, even when they truly believe they are. It is best to simply tell the Food Check-Out Day story to the best of your ability and trust in the reporter's professional ability to get it right. That's what they're trained to do. It's a simple matter of trust.

Afterward, if he/she does a good job on Food Check-Out Day, send a thank-you and make a mental note to deal with that person again instead of going through the news desk. That's the start of your relationship-building. You now have a "contact."

Arranging Photography

If you are trying to arrange for a local press photographer to attend your Food Check-Out Day event, then the news desk (or photo desk, if they have one) is a good starting point. If your reporter contact expresses interest in the story, you should inform him/her of any special photo opportunity. This might be a public relations effort at a local grocery store or a commemorative food donation to a charitable organization, such as the cooperative effort with Ronald McDonald House Charities. The reporter will often pass along such photo opportunities to staff photographers. You may, however, have to make contact with a photographer yourself.

Don't be discouraged if the photographer doesn't promise to attend your event -- photographers seldom make such promises, but they will always do their best if you can make this photographic opportunity sound attractive. While reporters are simply looking for a news story that sounds new and interesting, photographers want to illustrate the news with a good photo.

Don't Forget Radio and Television

Radio and television stations are also on the lookout for what sounds interesting. An interview with someone who knows the Food Check-Out Day message could make an ideal feature for a local station. The rules for dealing with broadcast news directors/reporters are essentially the same as dealing with the print media. Make sure you cover details of the Food Check-Out Day event including the date, location, time, etc. You may be asked to pay a visit to their studio to give a more in-depth story related to Food Check-Out Day and the wonders of American agriculture, maybe even as a talk show guest.

It's unlikely that your event will receive a mention as a main news item on one of the daily reports, but stories about Food Check-Out Day would likely fit into an afternoon show or be treated as a feature story.

When a Reporter Calls

There is a good chance your attempt to pitch the Food Check-Out Day story will be followed by a phone call from a reporter. Just what should you expect? Since you are looking for coverage, you certainly will want to grant an interview. You should, however, attempt to determine:

- Whether a phone interview will be the extent of your contact with the reporter, or does the reporter need a one-on-one interview?
- Will the phone interview or subsequent interview be taped?
- If the reporter is from a television station, will you be on camera live?
- How long will the subsequent interview take and where will it be conducted? Try to set a reasonable time limit. You may have more than one interview to do. Having a reasonable time limit shows you are cooperative, but lets the reporter know you may be busy during your event.
- What is the reporter's deadline?
- What type of story the reporter envisions -- news or feature?

The reporter who calls or meets with you in person should be able to answer many of these questions for you. Be particularly aware of reporters' deadlines. They have a job to do and editors to please. The deadline may be weeks -- or minutes -- away. Respect for those deadlines will go a long way in ensuring positive media relations in the future.

Interview Preparation

After referring to Farm Bureau's Food Check-Out Day news release and talking points, outline your main points. Once you've scheduled the interview, you should prepare three to five points to get your message across as briefly as possible -- especially for the broadcast media, you should limit the time of your responses, preferably to 20 seconds or less. Make sure to localize your comments when possible. When formulating your main points, ask yourself these questions.

- Why is recognition of Food Check-Out Day important?
- Why is it significant to consumers?
- What does it say about agriculture in your area?
- What is your personal contribution to this success story?

Here is a basic formula you might use when answering questions.

- Make a statement that outlines the purpose of Food Check-Out Day as briefly as possible: "Food Check-Out Day is a celebration of the bounty from America's farms and ranches and how that bounty is shared with American consumers through affordable food prices."
- Support your statement: "According to statistics provided by the Agriculture Department, the average American has to work just 37 days to pay for their family's food supply for the entire year."
- "Make a transition into your message: "This year we will commemorate this fact on Feb. 7. Compared to other expenses facing America's families, food is a bargain. While Americans must only work until early February to pay for their yearly food supply, in 2004 they had to work until April 11 just to pay for their taxes."
- State your message: "America's farmers and ranchers, including those of us right here in (your state or county), are the most productive in the world. We're proud of our contribution to society and Food Check-Out Day gives us the opportunity to share some of our success with others."

You also should be ready to answer any tough questions that might be offered as a follow-up. To prepare, list the 10 most difficult questions you might be asked regarding agriculture and food production -- perhaps topics such as chemical use or subsidies. Think about how you will make a transition from those questions into a key point you want to make about Food Check-Out Day. Colleagues and friends often can provide good sounding boards.

Don't forget to rehearse. Review the questions until you are confident you can handle each and every one. You might even record answers with a tape recorder. Don't plan to read your answers during the interview, however.

Interview Basics

During the actual interview, you should always keep the following points in mind.

- Relax. Chances are that an interview designed around Food Check-Out Day will be non-adversarial and serve as a good opportunity for you to tell the public about the success of American agriculture. Smile. Be personable and confident.
- Get your messages across. Even if you have said a message before, don't be afraid to repeat it. Don't ignore any of the reporter's questions, but take charge and steer the interview back to your main points. You are the expert. You know what is important to tell the public -- so tell them.
- Be informative. While Food Check-Out Day interviews might tend to be more conversational, always try to concentrate on the information you want to impart. Interviews are exchanges of information. You are the source of that information and the reporter represents the public. Do not feel obligated to maintain the social rules of conduct that guide conversations.
- Be aware of a reporter who is silent. This may tend to lead you into longer, drawn-out narratives that could dilute your basic message. It's human nature to want to fill those lulls with conversation. Don't. Lulls may not be as long as they seem. Make your point and stop talking.
- Again, be brief. Reporters generally don't want lengthy, drawn-out explanations. They're looking for quotable quotes -- a punchy line that will fill three lines of newsprint or 20 seconds of air time. Use your 20 seconds to get your message across -- there's a much greater likelihood it will be used. Knowing what you want to say in advance will go a long way in simplifying your answers. Forty-five seconds is about the maximum response time for television and other media as well, unless the reporter truly wants a complete understanding of some specific aspect of farming -- in which case you may have 90 seconds.
- NEVER go "off the record." There is no such thing as "off the record." An "off-the-record" comment may not be attributed to you directly, but the reporter often will use the information to confirm aspects of the story with other sources. If you don't want something to appear in print, don't say it.
- If the interview moves into questions about agriculture in general, don't use jargon, and try to end your answer with a point about Food Check-Out Day. Avoid using terms or acronyms that can't be quoted without explanation. Also, avoid lengthy statements such as: "It is clear that much additional work will be required before we have a complete understanding of the issue." Instead, say, "We're working on it."
- Always tell the truth. Give a direct answer when asked a direct question, even if the answer is "No," "I don't know" or "I'm sorry, I can't answer that question." You will come across as an honest, forthright person.
- Be patient. These are reporters, not ag scientists or Extension educators. You may have to begin at the beginning to help them understand an issue related to Food Check-Out Day and agriculture.

Working With the Media (cont'd)

- Even if a hostile question is asked, don't lose your temper. Sometimes reporters are intentionally rude to elicit a charged response. In the rare chance that this might happen during a Food Check-Out Day interview, don't fall into the trap. Respond politely, in control at all times. Don't get into arguments -- your angry comments may be reported without any mention of the provocation. Don't be defensive. Make positive statements instead of denying or refuting comments from others. State your message; let others speak for themselves.
- Be friendly. It's an interview, not an interrogation. Establish rapport with the reporter. Don't go into an interview with a negative or defensive attitude.
- Don't answer a question with a question, especially when you really know that the reporter is trying to push you toward a subject you don't want to address. The reporter asks, "What do you think about the plight of the nation's hungry people?" Don't say, "What do you mean by the nation's hungry people?" or "What do you think about it?" Such responses can come across as evasive or hostile. Simply say, "That's unfortunate (or interesting, depending on the question), but overall..." If you truly don't understand a question, simply ask the reporter to clarify.
- Even if a loaded question is lobbed your way, never say "No comment" or "I can neither confirm nor deny." The public views this as: "I know but I won't say." Instead, tell the reporter that you are unable or not qualified to comment and, if possible, why. If a reporter asks about statistics or information you know nothing about, tell the reporter you will attempt to have someone closer to that issue return a call. Again, don't answer questions if you are not the appropriate spokesperson. If a reporter presses, repeat your answer. Don't waver or go off the record.
- Remember that you are talking through the reporter to the public. How does Food Check-Out Day affect individuals in the community? Say it in terms readers and viewers can relate to.
- Be prepared to repeat yourself. Reporters may repeat their question because your answer was too long, too complex, they didn't understand you or they're simply trying to get a more concise response. Welcome the question as another opportunity to state your message, perhaps more clearly.
- Be aware of when you are being taped. In broadcast situations, such as in the studio or when talking to a radio reporter, it is wise to assume that everything you say is being recorded.

Lifeline Phrases

When you sense that an interview is straying into territory where you prefer not to go, do not hesitate to steer the discussion back to Food Check-Out Day. The following phrases will help you regain control of the interview.

- "To fully answer that, you'd need to talk to an expert on..., but I do know..."
- "I can tell you that, in general..."
- "That's too complicated for me to be able to answer/demonstrate properly, but I'd recommend that interested parties contact...Personally, I know that..."

Working With the Media (cont'd)

- “The answer to that may really come down to a consumer’s personal preference. What’s important is that the overall affordability of food...”
- “The scenario you are referring to really depends on knowing more about the specific situation..., but I can tell you that...”
- “I don’t know the answer to that. But, if you want to know...”

Tips for TV

If you are able to arrange a TV interview or are invited to appear as a guest in an in-studio TV program to talk about Food Check-Out Day, which you very well may, remember these few tips.

Before you go on:

- Wear clothes and makeup that you feel comfortable in, and wear a color that makes you look your best. Dress conservatively -- you want people to pay attention to what you are saying, not what you look like.
- Talk with the interviewer about Food Check-Out Day and about the general questions they wish to cover.
- Review your list of important points.
- Think in terms of quotes that a reporter can use.
- It might be a good idea to bring a calendar with you so you can visually demonstrate the difference in months between Food Check-Out Day (early February) and Tax Freedom Day (mid-April).

While you’re on:

- If nervous, take some deep breaths. Think about key points. Remember, you are well prepared.
- Look directly at the interviewer, not the camera. And, maintain eye contact.
- Use anecdotes, when appropriate, to dramatize your points. A good anecdote must be relevant, interesting and help you make a point.
- Use full names instead of acronyms -- say Agriculture Department rather than USDA and explain terms that may be unfamiliar.
- Never hesitate to politely refute comments that are untrue.

Your Role as Spokesperson

When you are conducting an interview for Food Check-Out Day or other agriculture-related topics, reporters will not distinguish between your personal opinion, Farm Bureau's position and facts about agriculture in general -- neither will the public.

Answer questions appropriately. You are a spokesperson for Farm Bureau and all of agriculture, not for yourself -- unless you are asked a question specific to your own farm or ranch. Don't speculate on issues that might come up during an interview if you do not know the answer. Also, answer one question at a time.

Reporters do have agendas. They want to:

- Develop stories with good audience appeal, which Food Check-Out Day has.
- Get the jump on any competitors covering the same story.
- Secure space or air time that other reporters are competing for.
- Find a new story or uncover a new angle, which Food Check-Out Day offers.

As a spokesperson, you also have an agenda. It is to use the Food Check-Out Day event to:

- Position farmers and ranchers as efficient producers of safe, affordable, abundant food while caring for the environment.
- Inform consumers of the success story of American agriculture.
- Let consumers know that America's farmers care about the price and quality of their food.
- And, if the situation arises, talk about the important health and nutritional benefits of the food produced by America's farmers and ranchers.
- The more you work with reporters to help them meet their objectives, the more likely they will be to meet yours.

Gather Some Background

Background materials are helpful to a reporter, particularly if a topic is complex, or involves complex statistics. Personalize and make copies of the Farm Bureau news release to hand out after your interview. Other material, such as a copy of Farm Bureau's Farm Facts publication, could also prove helpful to a reporter. You can also give the reporter a copy of the page with general agricultural facts included in this folder. Always leave the reporter a phone number where you can be reached, as well as the name and number of additional sources, possibly a member of your state Farm Bureau staff.