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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Innovative New ‘California Thursdays’ Program Serves California Students Fresh California Food

Oakland, CA, October 23, 2014 ... Tens of thousands of California students will sit down to a surprise today: a meal made from foods grown in California and prepared freshly just for them. And, if organizers of California Thursdays are successful, this will become a regular part of menus for students across the state.

Fifteen school districts, large, small, urban and rural, that collectively serve over 190 million school meals a year are participating in today’s pilot statewide rollout. The program is predicated on the simple logic that California children will benefit from more fresh California fruits and vegetables.

But implementation of California Thursdays is far from simple. Food service directors have invested thousands of hours to reform an entrenched, centralized food system that ships produce around the nation, sometimes moving California produce to Chicago and other distant locations before returning it, highly processed, to California. Added to that are the challenges of creating recipes that kids enjoy and that meet federal standards, finding local farmers who can supply school districts, training staff to cook and serve fresh meals, and encouraging students to try them.

Why bother? These innovative food service directors, in collaboration with the nonprofit Center for Ecoliteracy, know that buying, preparing, and serving local California food is a triple win.

“Whenever we serve fresh, locally grown food to children with these recipes, they devour it,” says Zenobia Barlow, Executive Director of the Center for Ecoliteracy. “That alone is a victory. Properly nourished children are healthier and ready to learn. Additionally, California Thursdays benefits local economies and the environment.”

So today students in every corner of the state will enjoy menus featuring healthy, student-tested recipes cooked onsite from scratch with local ingredients. Options range from fresh Chicken Fajita Rice Bowls to Asian Noodles with Bok Choy to Penne with Chorizo and Kale.

School districts pioneering today’s California Thursdays program include large urban districts such as Los Angeles, Oakland, Riverside, San Diego, and San Francisco, as well as suburban and rural districts such as Alford,

Coachella, Conejo Valley, Elk Grove, Hemet, La Honda-Pescadero, Lodi, Monterey Peninsula, Oceanside and Turlock.

Funded with grants from the California Department of Food and Agriculture's Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, The California Endowment, TomKat Charitable Trust, U.S. Department of Agriculture and Center for Ecoliteracy donors, California Thursdays was originally developed and successfully piloted with Oakland Unified School District last year. The program includes scaled recipes, staff training and procurement guidelines to assist schools in their transition to a healthier, more sustainable meal program, as well as resources for teachers and community engagement assets.

Nourished Students Are Better Learners

Less than one in ten children consumes enough fruits and vegetables a day, yet studies show that kids are more likely to eat school meals if the food is fresh and attractive. This provides an ideal opportunity for school districts' food service directors to have a major impact on their community and their students' lives.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, better nutrition improves academic grades and standardized test scores, reduces absenteeism and strengthens memory. One in four of California's children lives in a food insecure household, and another one in three is overweight or obese. Since many kids consume over half their day's calories at school, it is important that school districts ensure that the meals they serve are healthy and balanced.

"Nutritious school meals also make perfect financial sense," says Jennifer LeBarre, Oakland Unified School District's Executive Director of Nutrition Services, who led the California Thursdays' pilot program. "Healthy kids put less strain on our district's health, counseling, and special education services, while lowering absentee rates and improving school finances. We're funded based on how many kids show up to class, so it's worth investing in quality meals that children are more likely to eat."

In addition, California Thursdays will take taxpayer funds that might otherwise go out of state and redirect them back into local economies. Economists say that every \$1 spent on local food fosters \$1.86 in local economic activity. Every job created in the production of local food also leads to an addition of two or more new jobs within the community.

"California Thursdays is a great first step in celebrating all that California agriculture has to offer," says California Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary Karen Ross. "It brings awareness to the fresh, wholesome and seasonally appropriate bounty of our great state. If we feed our children good, healthy food, if we connect them back to the place and the people and the practices that it came from, I think we're going to have great decision makers in our future."

The Center for Ecoliteracy and its partners are planning to expand today's California Thursday to a weekly program and invite more school districts to participate. In Oakland last year, for example, California Thursdays began as a once-a-month program and transitioned to every Thursday within a school year.

For more information about California Thursdays or to learn how new school districts can join this program, visit www.ecoliteracy.org/california-thursdays.

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EDITORS: A full online pressroom that includes contact information for every participating school district, press kit materials and photographs of meal prep, students eating and product shots is available at: www.californiathursdayspr.org.

The Center for Ecoliteracy is a Berkeley-based nonprofit dedicated to education for sustainable living and a pioneer in school lunch reform. For more information, visit www.ecoliteracy.org.