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**The Progress Fund helps local farmers to gain Good Agricultural Practices certification**  
*Produce Grown Here program seeks to give area growers the edge by giving them an early start on emerging food safety trend*

Greensburg, PA – July 20, 2010 – Southwestern Pennsylvania farmers seeking to join the trend toward food safety certification can now get free help through The Progress Fund’s Produce Grown Here, or PGH, program.

Grocers and restaurateurs increasingly ask for verification of the safety of the fresh food they buy, and local farmers looking to fill the produce aisles, deli cases and refrigerators of the future will need to accommodate them. The Progress Fund is reaching out to farms that serve some of the region’s premier buyers of local produce, and offering to help them prepare for Good Agricultural Practices certification under United States Department of Agriculture and Food and Drug Administration principles.

“If we want to build a local food industry, we need to make sure we do it wisely and well,” says David A. Kahley, president & CEO of The Progress Fund. “Eat’n Park Hospitality Group, for example, is committed to serving local food, and they want to get the best, most wholesome product.” Eat’n Park Hospitality Group is a supporter of the Produce Grown Here program. One way for a farm to show that it incorporates sound management principles is through Good Agricultural Practices, or GAP, certification. GAP certification is a process developed by the USDA and FDA, and administered by private auditors, which ensures that water, soil, topography, personnel and sanitation all maximize food safety.

GAP certification “tells the buyer, who doesn’t know the farmer, and who doesn’t know the farm, that the product is safe,” says Produce Grown Here Project Manager David Eson.

“Buyers are requiring it as a way of mitigating their risk and their liability.”

GAP certification can seem an onerous prospect to busy farmers. The Progress Fund's Produce Grown Here program, with help from the R.K. Mellon Foundation and the Benedum Foundation, has taken several measures to make certification less burdensome.

- The Progress Fund has retained Mikal Merlina, of The Rhizosphere LLC, a consultancy focused on marketing and development of agricultural businesses, to help farmers to prepare for GAP certification. Mikal is reaching out to farms serving the region's premier grocers and restaurateurs. For those who wish to pursue certification, he will visit and lead them through a self-assessment designed to ready them for the independent audit, at no charge. "Understandably, farmers have concerns about certification," says Mikal. "I can help farmers get more comfortable with this." When a farmer is prepared for an audit, Mikal will help them schedule it with one of the handful of certification professionals in Pennsylvania.
- The Progress Fund is working with Diana Edicott, a Kansas City-area farmer with the Good Natured Family Farms co-op, to develop materials that will make GAP certification easier for farmers to understand and achieve. Ms. Edicott has helped a wide range of farmers in her area to become GAP certified. "She's able to translate USDA verbiage into a language the average person can understand," says Mikal.
- The Progress Fund has also identified funding to help farmers to pay for GAP audits. "Farmers are going to be chosen over their peers if they're GAP certified," says David Eson. If certification helps local farmers to place their wares on store displays, menus and plates of area consumers, then it will elevate the region's food quality by making it safer and fresher.

For further information on The Progress Fund, call (724) 216-9160, or visit [www.progressfund.org](http://www.progressfund.org).

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*The Progress Fund is a vigorous non-profit loan fund that creates jobs and improves communities by providing entrepreneurial coaching and capital to small businesses in the travel & tourism industry. The Progress Fund serves 39 counties in Pennsylvania, Appalachian Ohio and West Virginia. The Progress Fund was founded in 1997, and has made 330 loans totaling more than \$33.2 million to 192 enterprises, creating or preserving more than 2,207 jobs.*

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