

For immediate release: **October 23, 2002**

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It's a Halloween treat for the region's cooperatives
as they celebrate national Co-op Month

USDA helps farmers revitalize the rural economy

Pioneer Valley, MA -- "We like to do something every year to commemorate October as Co-op Month," says Dick Burke, Rural Development coordinator for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in southern New England, speaking from his office in Amherst. October is the month that cooperatives and credit unions, businesses owned by their members, tell their story to the public. In New England and New York state, approximately 10,000 co-ops serve more than 10 million members. According to Burke, that's something worth celebrating.

This year, commemoration of Co-op Month will end on Thursday, October 31st, in Greenfield. Dick Burke and USDA Rural Development State Director David Tuttle will be in town to present a check for \$297,000 to the Cooperative Development Institute. They will be joined by members of local cooperatives and community leaders. The press conference will take place at CDI at 11:00 a.m. October 31st, at the Cooperative Development Institute, located at 277 Federal Street in Greenfield.

The USDA grant, administered through its Rural Development, Rural Business-Cooperative Service, is awarded on a competitive basis. It is intended to provide rural residents with education and assistance in starting and managing cooperatives and other self-help tools. CDI will use its grant to help with some aspect of a new or existing member-owned business: incorporating, planning, membership services, financing, product development, or business retention and growth.

In the Northeast region, CDI has provided information to nearly 500 groups and intensive technical assistance to two dozen cooperatives since 1998. This effort has created or retained nearly 200 jobs, and brought in revenues of well over \$800 million.

CDI was established in 1994 as the Northeast region's center for starting and strengthening cooperatives, which are businesses that are co-owned and controlled by their members. Lynn Benander, co-director of the institute, elaborates on where the USDA grant money will go this year.

"We'll focus on cooperatives that help producers earn greater margins on their agricultural products through value-added processing, and co-ops that improve the quality of rural life. More and more emerging and established co-ops realize that while they may be experts at producing, they are not deriving all the benefit they could from their products. They're looking for people with expertise in a whole array development skills.

"For example, Green Mountain Spinnery in southern Vermont is a 20-year old co-op of sheep

(MORE)

and llama farmers who produce top quality yarns. We're helping them with strategic planning, member outreach, and business development to help them maximize the return on their operations."

Benander continues, "The new Northeast Federation of Family Farm Cooperatives consists of 10 small co-ops lowering their costs through joint marketing, insurance and transportation initiatives. We'll support business planning, service and market development, and membership program design."

Another project CDI is providing with primary technical assistance is Pioneer Valley Photovoltaics in Franklin County, a new worker-owned co-op that is installing solar electric and solar hot water systems. Benander notes, "They are creating good local jobs that will lower the region's dependency on outside sources of power, and enhance our environment."

And CDI is helping in the development of a biodiesel project for Co-opPlus of Western Massachusetts, a three-year old consumer co-op they helped to launch. Bob Rottenberg, the institute's other co-director, says, "This is a good opportunity for towns in western Massachusetts to reduce their emissions without capital expenditures, by using a cleaner diesel fuel for their corporate and public fleets of trucks and buses."

Members of cooperatives which CDI has helped will be on hand for the festivities in Greenfield on October 31st. Also invited are state legislators and other community leaders who have supported the growth of the cooperative economy in Massachusetts and the Northeast.

The following day, November 1, marks the opening of a two-day conference in Northampton, Massachusetts on sustainable forestry cooperatives (see attached). The event is co-sponsored by the USDA, state forestry services, CDI, and several other partners, and will address the development potential of the Northeast's 60 million acres of privately owned non-industrial forest..

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