Farm To School Grants

Click the Image to see a short Video.

This Is a Third Way to Bring an Aquaponics Project into your District or School, which appeals to anyone who believes in the motto:

Go Big Or Go Home!

The three ways are:

1. **One Classroom Aquaponics System in one School.**
2. **A District-Wide Aquaponics Project, which would place 3 Aquaponics Systems in 3 Schools across all 3 Grade Levels.**
3. **A Large-Scale Aquaponics Project called "A Food Forever Farm"**

How can you purchase **A Food Forever Farm?** Get Awarded a **"Farm To School Grant",** which means you write a Grant to compete in the annual **Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Competition.** Make a Request For Application **(RFA)** as soon as they are available**.** You can do that in early September of 2026, and your completed Grant would be due, 3 Months later in December of 2026, which means you would need to start on your Grant soon.

Congress Approves a Different Amount of Money for These Grants every year. There are no stats for 2026 as Awardees and Amounts will not be announced until June. There are new Rules as of 2026. The Minimum amount that Applicants can request is **$100,000**. But there is a caveat, which is a **25% non-federal match (cash or in-kind) making the Total Grant $133,334** (details to be explained later in this document).

Who Is Eligible? All Arizona school districts (public, charter, or private that operate a Child Nutrition Program **(CNP)** such as the National School Lunch Program **(NSLP)** or School Breakfast Program **(SBP)** are eligible to apply for or participate in the Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program. There is no fixed list of "eligible districts" — eligibility is open to any district or school that participates in USDA Child Nutrition Programs **(CNP)**, as long as the project improves local food access in **CNP** meals and includes agricultural education components.

However the Eligibility gets complicated as most things do when dealing with the Government, and in 2026, besides the new minimum, the Rules got stricter:

Eligible Applicants and Partnership Rules for (FY 2026 Request For Application RFA)
Eligible entity types include:

- State agencies
- Indian Tribal Organizations **(ITOs)**
- **Child Nutrition Program (CNP) operators** (schools/school districts, childcare institutions, and summer sponsors participating in NSLP, SBP, CACFP, or SFSP — in good standing with their state agency)
- Local agencies
- Agricultural producers/groups
- Non-profits (with 501(c)(3) status)

What is a State Agency?

"Any statewide government agency that administers or works in partnership with the agency that administers the Federal Child Nutrition Programs (CNPs) (e.g., Office of Public Instruction, Department of Education, Department of Agriculture, Department of Health, etc.). Eligibility is not restricted to the State agency that administers the CNP(s)."

It appears the Government makes it **easier** to get one of these Patrick Leahy Farm To School Grants **for Government entities and ITO's than for School Districts**, but if you're willing to deal with the red tape, as a School District, Partner Up with two other eligible entities and can come up with the 25% non-federal match in cash or in kind, you can succeed in getting a significant amount of Grant Funds for a **Food Forever Farm**. **More about what's involved in the Grant Application, and details about what is a Food Forever Farm** later in this document**.**

What Is a Key Rule?

Key Rule: State Agencies and ITOs can apply as a single entity (with one partner required). All other entities—including CNP operators like **school districts—must apply as part of a partnership**. School districts/SFAs (School Food Authorities) are explicitly directed to apply under the **CNP** operator category (not as local agencies).

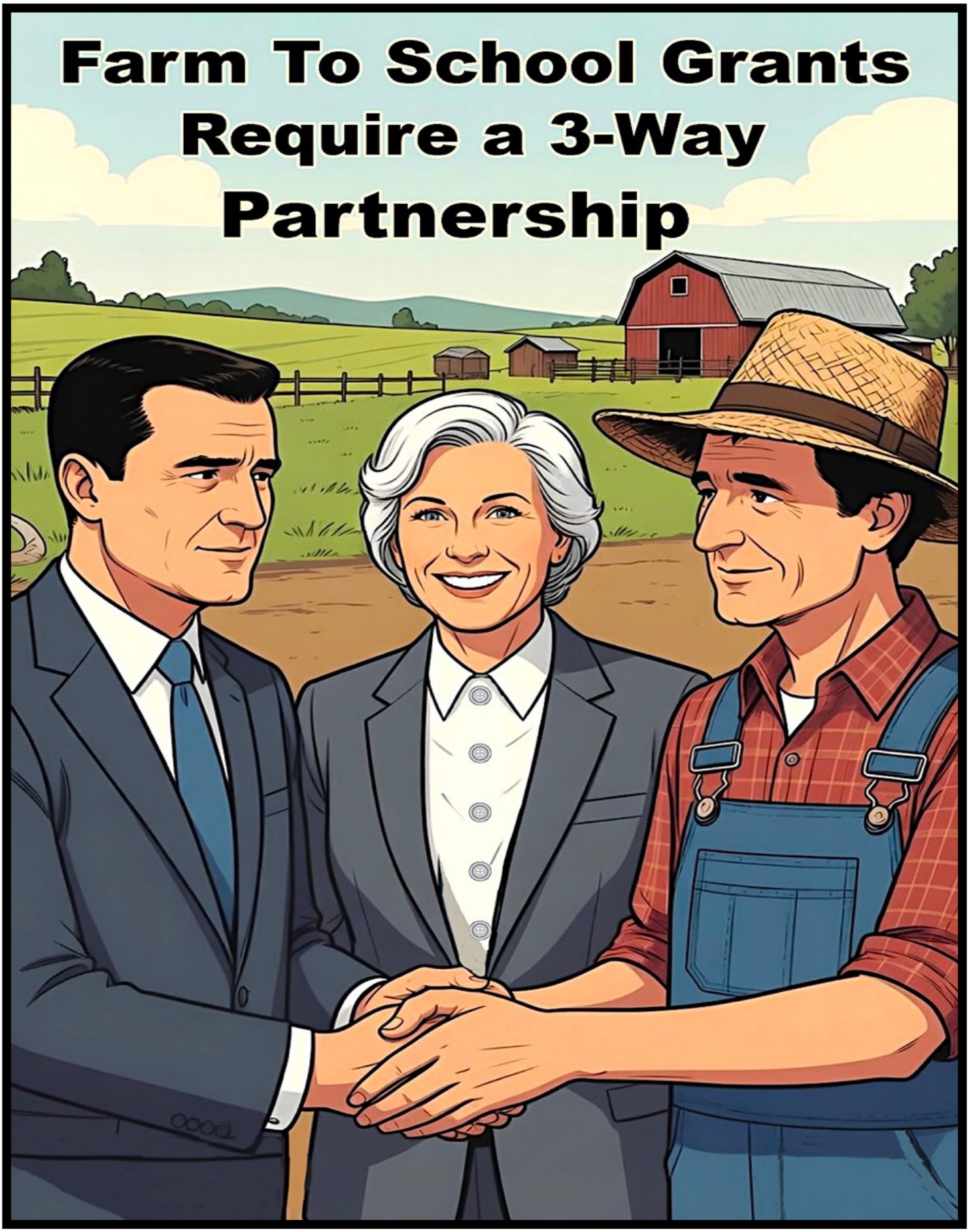
What is a Partnership?

A partnership is defined as **a group of three or more entities** (including the coordinating/lead entity that submits the application and would receive the award). Requirements include:

- At least **one eligible CNP operator** as a partner (if the lead/coordinating entity is not itself a CNP operator/administrator).
- The project must actively involve partners in implementation.
- Only **two partnership letters** are required (max one page each, from non-lead partners, confirming commitment, roles, contributions, and relevant experience/CNP participation).
- All projects must tie to increasing local food access in CNPs via procurement, education, gardens, etc.

CNP operators (like school districts) are eligible to serve as the **coordinating/lead entity** but still need to form this multi-entity partnership—they cannot apply solo. Applications from non-eligible entities or those failing partnership/match rules are screened out.

If you have gotten this far, and still think this might be your answer to bring a formidable Aquaponics Project into your District with a Greenhouse that houses a **Large-Scale Food Forever Farm** System that could feed a significant number of Students while teaching Sustainable Farming, rigorous Science, how to run an Aquaponics Farmer's Market and more, keep reading.


Farm To School Grants
Require a 3-Way
Partnership

Click To View A Short Video

First things first. On page 4 above, you discovered that as a School District, you are eligible to apply for a Farm To Food Grant, but you have to have 2 Partners to make a 3-way Partnership and your Partners must be involved in the implementation of the Project right from the beginning.

So the first thing you want to do is get your Partners lined up. The List of who could be your Partners is on the bottom of Page 3. As an Arizona School District, you could request that the Arizona Department of Education Partner with you. But it's important to understand, your partners need to be actively not symbolically involved with your project, and you will need to solicit the ADE early before anyone else snags them.

Tips for Building a Strong Partnership

- Reach out to local agricultural producers, **Arizona's farm-to-school coordinator/network**, extension services, or nonprofits with 501(c)(3) status.
- Ensure partners have clear, complementary roles (e.g., one handles procurement, another education/gardens).
- Document everything clearly — vague commitments can lead to disqualification.

Take Advantage of Your Pre-September Lead Time

Prior to September 2026, you have some Lead Time to work on your Grant before the Request For Application is Released (sometime in September)

- Get on top of the short 3 Month Timeline once the RFA is Released by knowing when the FY 2027 Food To Farm **(F2S)** Cycle begins, which means you need to visit the USDA **Food Nutrition Services (FNS)** Website, often starting in mid August as the Call for Applications usually is released in September.
- Contact **USDA FNS Farm to School Staff** for Guidance tailored to your School District.
- Contact **The National Farm to School Network** who can also help identify potential Partners.
- Consider getting involved with the **Arizona Farm To School Collaborative**, which is an Initiative of the Mollen Foundation that offers a one-year professional learning experience designed to empower schools, districts, early childhood centers, and communities across the state to build strong, sustainable Farm To School Programs.
- Once the RFA is Released, Download the full Document from the USDA Food Nutrition Services (FNS) website and **Review Sections 3.1-3.2 and 4.7** for the latest details.
- Bring in **Aquaponics USA**, who will be your **Food Forever Farm** Vendor responsible for preparing your Budget and the Pre-Award Project Narrative. (To be explained later in this document)

Why is Aquaponics USA Introducing Farm To School Grants?

Aquaponics USA not only sells small-scale Classroom sized Aquaponics Teaching & Food Growing Systems. Their Retired NASA Engineer, Oliver Duffy, has also designed large-scale Aquaponics Systems, called **"Food Forever Farms"**, and these larger Systems are a perfect match for the Up-scaled Farm To School Program that has a Minimum RFA Request of $100,000.

Aquaponics USA is running a small Food Forever Farm Demonstration Greenhouse in Show Low, Arizona, not far from ____ School Districts in the surrounding area, and they want to be **YOUR VENDOR** that supplies everything you need to have a Sustainable, Highly Productive, Year Round Teaching & Food Growing Vegetable & Food Fish, **Food Forever Farm** in your District.

They don't want to be your Partner or a Producer in the 3-Way Partnership you will need to create. **They want to be the VENDOR that will turn your District/School into a Producer of the finest Organic Vegetables, Fruits and Food Fish ever raised while simultaneously Teaching your Students rigorous Science using their accompanying 688 Pages of Science Curriculum for all Grade Levels.**

And they want to start by giving you a **Specified, Itemized Quote for the $133,334 Farm To School Grant** that would cover everything you would need to have a fully functioning Food Forever Farm including:

1. The Greenhouse (Supplied by a Separate Vendor)
2. The Climate-Controlling Greenhouse System
2. The Aquaponics Food Forever Farm
3. The Delivery of said Farm
4.The Installation of said Farm
5.The 2-Day How To Operate A Food Forever Farm Class
6. The 1-Day How To Present the Science Curriculum Class

Aquaponics USA offers a **60 Page Document describing the intricacies of "How Food Forever Farms Work"**, which requires the signing of an NDA to View. **If you think you would like to file a RFA for the 2027 Farm To Food Grant, and make Aquaponics USA your Food Forever Farm Vendor, please Request Our NDA.**

Discovering **Farm To Food Grants is a Vision Come True for Grace Sylke**, the Marketing Director at Aquaponics USA as after **Exhibiting at the ADE Teachers' Institute & Leading Change Conference in Glendale, AZ** (See Photo on Page 9) and **meeting Dr. Guzman, Associate Superintendent of the Arizona Department of Education**, Grace had a vision, which she shared with Dr. Guzman in a follow up letter which stated the following:

Making Arizona Schools Citadels For Food Security:

"I'm feeling a bit Martin Luther Kingish sharing this idea with you as it's a real "I Have A Dream" kind of Concept that has only been discussed within our company. **The idea is for Arizona to lead a Food Security Movement by building Large-Scale Aquaponics Systems into Greenhouses and/or Warehouses placed on School property** where Food can be grown year round in preparation for possible Food Scarcity due to Climate Change and/or other weather challenges. My feeling is that there are quite a few Schools that have property which could be dedicated to this endeavor, and **Grants could be written to appeal to our new Secretary of Health and Human Services, RFK Jr., who is all about improving our Childrens' Health**. If you find this idea, interesting, please let me know as I would love to discuss it with you further. It just so happens, we not only offer small-scale Aquaponics Systems, but we also have Large-Scale Aquaponics system Designs and are running a Demonstration Greenhouse 6,000 ft. up in the White Mountains of Arizona that is growing Vegetables and Food Fish year round in what we call **Food Forever Farms**."

At the time that Grace wrote this to Dr. Guzman in the Fall of 2025, she had no idea that the Patrick Leahy Farm To School Grant Program even existed, but somehow she was connecting to it and imagining how it could benefit Arizona Schools, their Students and surrounding communities.

What Is A Food Forever Farm?

To get the fully detailed description of a **Food Forever Farm**, you need to Request for and Sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement **(NDA) as much of the AgriTech in Food Forever Farms is proprietary.** If you are being presented a hard copy of this Document by an Aquaponics USA Salesperson, you can get the **PDF** by Clicking on the **"Master Sheet To Access AUSA PDF Docs"**, which has been sent to your Email Box.

So here is the short, less detailed version of **"What Is A Food Forever Farm"?**

Food Growing Farms are way bigger than our popular Classroom Teaching & Food Growing Systems designed for Schools. They utilize multiples of our largest Classroom System, the **FGS-65**, with two Deep Media Grow Beds and a 500 gallon Tank (Fish Tank not shown) to grow more food than a typical Classroom would need.

Deep Media Grow Beds have been borrowed from Hydroponics AgriTech and are a common component in Aquaponics Systems. The 65 sq. Foot Deep Media Beds that are in a Food Forever Farm are 4' x 8' Polystyrene Beds that are 12" Deep, hence the name, "Deep Media".

The advantages of Deep-Media Grow Beds are many when you want to grow Flowering Plants that put out Vegetables and Fruits. Flowering plants are called Angiosperms and have over 250 thousand species. They are the most successful species of Plants on Earth. The ones we are most familiar with grow fruits or vegetables after first producing a flower. They are often large plants that sometimes need Trellis Netting for support. The ones planted directly into the Grow Bed Media need that 12" depth to sufficiently hold the large ones like Peppers, Tomatoes and Egg Plant. Tomatoes need both Deep Media and Trellis Netting for support.

There is more media in Deep Media Beds to cultivate a greater amount of the friendly bacteria necessary to convert ammonia from the fish waste into nitrates for optimum plant growth. This process, which happens in Aquaponics, is a part of the Nitrogen Cycle, one of the main topics in **Part 1** of the Aquaponics USA **AGWARTS** Curriculum.

Grow Beds won't grow anything unless they hold Grow Bed Media. The Media replaces soil that soil gardeners use to grow their plants. The Media also holds the friendly bacteria the plants need to grow and be healthy. Hydroton is the best Grow Bed Media on the market. It is made of pH neutral Expanded Clay and is, therefore, an ecologically sustainable medium. The pebbles have neutral buoyancy in water, do not compact, are inert, contain no nutrients and are completely reusable.

Although Deep Media Grow Beds are a common component in Aquaponics Systems, the ones in a Food Forever Farm designed by Oliver Duffy, the retired Aerospace Engineer who is the CEO of Aquaponics USA are totally unique. It's what you don't see that makes them that way and why we need an NDA to share what is happening underneath the Hydroton.

In the Right Grow Bed are Tomatoes. Tomatoes grown in an Aquaponics System are beyond delicious. There are two kinds of Tomato Plants, Determinate and Indeterminate. Teachers with 65 sq. Ft. Grow Beds can plant Indeterminate Tomato Plants in them because they are big enough to handle the roots that an Indeterminate Plant will put down into the Grow Bed Media.

Tomato Plants are the only Plants that have to be pruned, which means the sucker branches that will not produce Tomatoes have to be removed to allow for the producing branches to put out more Tomatoes. Pruning Tomato Plants can be a time consuming chore, which needs to be done weekly to stay ahead of it, and would be an important task for Students who need to learn about maintenance and care of their Food Forever Farm along with the importance of consistency.

Each of the 65 sq. ft. Grow Beds are supported by 3 sturdy steel Tables. All of the Plants you see in the Image on Page 11 are Flowering Plants. In the Left Grow Bed are big Red Swiss Chard Plants. Swiss Chard can grow to be huge in an Aquaponics System and it stays tender and delicious even if it's left in the Grow Bed for a couple of Months. Aquaponics Farmers do not see Swiss Chard Flower because it does not Flower until it Bolts, which means it's growing time is over and it is ready to go to seed.

Food Forever Farms have several other Components besides Deep Media Grow Beds.They also have a Vertical Growing System Aquaponics USA calls a **"Lettuce Wall"** that is capable of growing massive amounts of Lettuce and other Leafy Greens.

Aquaponics USA's Lettuce Walls were named by there 35,000 TikTok Followers after they put up a Video demonstrating showing how easy it is to plant and harvest the Walls. **Lettuce Walls** are another example of why Aquaponics USA does not require a Competitive Bid process when a School District brings them in an a Vendor. There simply is nothing like what they are doing out there. The Farm To School Grant requires Aquaponics USA to demonstrate this fact in what is called a Pre-Award Project Narrative, which they will write for you.

Above you see a Lettuce Wall that is ready to harvest. It is growing two kinds of Lettuce, Butter Lettuce and Romaine. This Lettuce Wall in our Aquaponics USA Demonstration Greenhouse is capable of growing 108 heads of Lettuce or other types of Leafy Greens like Arugula, Swiss Chard or Basil every 8-9 weeks from seed. Below is a Video of “Harvesting A Lettuce Wall”. **Click the Image to View the Video.**

In front of the Lettuce Wall, you see the edge of a Table with Leafy Green Plants on it. These Plants are actually growing out of another proprietary Component created by Oliver, the Aquaponics USA Engineer and his System Designer, Keil Plotczyk.

At Aquaponics USA, the Lettuce Wall is called the **Stage 2 Vertical Duffy Duct System** after Oliver Duffy. The Table in front of it is called the **Stage 1 Horizontal Duffy Duct System**, and these two Components work together to grow a lot of Vegetables in two stages. **Most of the other Aquaponics Designers are using a one Stage Floating Raft System to grow Lettuce** as seen in the Photo on the Left.

Oliver’s 2-Stage System makes all of the difference for several reasons:
1. The young Seedlings are moved to the Vertical space-saving Lettuce Wall or the Deep Media Grow Beds about half way through their grow out time leaving space in the Horizontal System for more Seedlings. All of the Vegetable Seedlings not just Leafy Greens go into the into the Stage 1 Horizontal System (not shown).

2. The Floating Raft Systems seen below are not only water heavy, but when they are as long as these, of which the photo is only showing a partial section, it becomes difficult to maintain consistent water quality from one end to the other.

In traditional Floating Rafts, Plants need to be spaced according to their fully grown out head width. From a root viewpoint, this spacing is much more than is required. The disadvantage of DWC is the amount of water that needs to be pushed through the system, especially if the grow beds are long, in order to maintain consistent water chemistry from end to end and the pumping and electricity required to do that.

Most of the water going through the DWC trough never comes in contact with the plant root. If the DWC grow bed is elevated, then its weight becomes a factor and a costly supporting structure must be designed appropriately. DWC grow beds are generally limited to leafy green plants whose roots can tolerate continuous water submersion and named Deep Water Culture **(DWC)** in the field.

Oliver's redesign of Floating Rafts (seen on Page 15) **i**s a Horizontal System of PVC Pipes designed exclusively fo**r** Seedlings rather than **f**ully grown out plants because the Seedlings get transplanted either to the Deep Media Beds or the Vertical Stage 2 Duffy Duct System when they are still small.

3. The Stage 1 Horizontal System pumps way less water through the Ducts. It has multiple raised PVC T's within which a Net Pot with the bottom cut out fits perfectly.

The roots grow out of the bottom of the Net Pot to make contact with the water that is flowing through the System. In the photo above, Keil, our System Designer and Greenhouse Manager, is using the extended front end of the multi-purpose Table to harvest one Duct from the Stage 1 Vertical Array, which snaps into place within clamps that sit at both ends of the Table. At the back of the Table, is a second Duct from the Lettuce Wall, which was just harvested.

On the Left, is another view of the **Stage 1 Horizontal Duffy Duct System** full of Seedlings that are past ready to transplant.

The Second component of this efficient and easy to operate 4 Stage Process is called the Seedling Incubation Table **(SIT)**.

The SIT

Seedling Incubation Table

The **SIT** is yet another proprietary design for **growing out Seeds into Seedlings**. Using a proprietary Seedling Tray design, t**he SIT automatically waters your Seedlings until they have enough root mass to move over to the Stage 3 Horizontal Growing Table.** So it actually is the second Stage of the 4-Stage Grow Out Process that starts with planting your Seeds into the Proprietary Seedling Trays to be described next.

How the automatic watering happens is described in the Document called “How Food Forever Farm Systems Work”, which is subject to an NDA. Request your NDA here today, and we’ll get it out to you. Below is an Image of the Proprietary Seed Trays sitting in the SIT.

Here are four Proprietary Speed Seedling Trays that are especially designed to work in the SIT where water from the Fish Tanks is routed into the SIT and floods them up to their roots 2 times every day until their roots are long enough to reach the water in the Horizontal Stage 3 Tubes.

Food Forever Farms for the Patrick Leahy Farm To School Grants, are sized precisely to meet the Grant's Awarded Amount. That means they start at $100,000, and along with the graduating Grant Awards, could go up to $500,000. Of course, the $500,000 **Food Forever Farm** would be five times larger than the $100,000 one.

Food Forever Farms have several other Components besides Deep Media Grow Beds. They also have a Vertical Growing System we call a Lettuce Wall that is capable of growing massive amounts of Lettuce and other Leafy Greens. It's our Lettuce Wall Videos that made our TikTok Channel take off.