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Hey Congress! Newest Farmers Union Chapter Coming

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New England farms are small farms. Competing for funding with the vast agricultural operations of the Midwest, small farms are often left with an inequitable piece of the pie. Annie Cheatham has set out to change that. She was recently appointed president of the New England Farmers Union (NEFU), the newest chapter of the National Farmers Union (Note similar initials: NFU).

Formed in 2006, NEFU's membership of 1,800 farming and fishing families are currently based in Massachusetts. This number is expected to grow exponentially with outreach to Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut and Rhode Island. Members of other Farmers Union chapters around the U.S. receive benefits such as access to dental, vision, and accident insurance; technical assistance; a competitive credit card program (with a percentage of each purchase benefiting Farmers Union organizations); a subscription to their state newsletter; a carbon credit program; action alerts via e-mail; and the opportunity to participate in "fly ins" which allow them to speak directly with decision makers on Capitol Hill. "We are currently reviewing these and other benefits for New England members," Cheatham said. "Every Farmers Union chapter is different, and when we launch our membership drive we want a package that will attract New England members."

According to Cheatham, "The strongest reason for an individual or association to join NEFU is access to leaders in Washington." Its parent, NFU, was vocal throughout President Barack Obama's campaign and is in a strong position to advocate for issues that are high on the New England agenda. "The staff at the national office is closely linked with leaders of the House and Senate agriculture committees, and to the US Department of Agriculture," Cheatham said. "And because the concerns of NFU are the same as those of New England growers and fishermen, NEFU will be in good company with good access to power brokers in DC."

With Cheatham at the helm, NEFU will focus on policy areas that will benefit New England members. Cheatham identified organic standards, advocating for nutrition programs that benefit regional producers, specialty crop grants, renewable energy, support for cooperatives and rural development, conservation programs, regional equity, and Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) as just several examples of issues that NEFU and NFU will work on together.

Cheatham said she would be reaching out to organizations such as NOFA, American Farmland Trust (AFT), Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (NESAWG), First Pioneer Farm Credit, Maine Organic Farming and Gardening Association, New England commodity groups and many others to recruit new members. These allies have already expressed enthusiasm about partnering with this major voice in Washington. Currently in the process of forming an executive board, Cheatham expects to officially launch NEFU in early April. Ms. Cheatham is the former executive director of Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA).

She continues to serve as a consultant to CISA as well as to AFT and NESAWG. On a personal note, Cheatham says, “The National Farmers Union aligns with my values emotionally and politically. I’m committed to farm families, food access, buy local programs, regional equity, cooperative development, conservation, and public access to organic food.” She adds, “I like starting and building projects and I’m excited to branch out regionally.” Cheatham’s wide network of connections and her passion for invigorating the local region’s economy are strong factors for success in growing a dynamic branch of this powerful agency.

Both new and seasoned farmers, organizations and advocates are invited to get involved with NEFU. For membership information, go to <http://nfu.org/in-the-states/en> and follow the directions for online registration. It’s \$25 for Friend of a Farmer and Fisherman (non-voting category) or \$40 for Individual Farmer and Fisherman (people who receive an income from farming and fishing). The NEFU office is based in Shelburne Falls, Mass. For more information, contact Annie Cheatham at 413-522-5020 or anniecheatham06@gmail.com.