



## AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES

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# Penn State named site for World Food Forum Youth Food Lab



*The innovation lab — which will serve the U.S. and other portions of North America — will build youth leaders in food security and climate solutions*



Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences has been selected to host a United Nations World Food Forum Youth Innovation Lab. Faculty and students who were present for the World Food Day Global Ceremony, held in Rome this week, were, from

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**OCTOBER 18, 2024** By Amy Duke

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — Penn State's [College of Agricultural Sciences](#) has been selected to host a prestigious World Food Forum Youth Food Lab, a key initiative of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to address global food security and climate change.

As the sole site in the United States, Penn State joins an exclusive network of labs in Europe, Asia and South America. The announcement was made during the FAO's flagship event, the World Food Forum, held in Rome during the week of Oct. 14 and attended by tens of thousands of participants worldwide. Ambassador Jeffrey Prescott, the U.S. representative to the United Nations Agencies for Food and Agriculture, was present and recognized the importance of Penn State's new lab in empowering young innovators in his remarks.

Troy Ott, dean of the College of Agricultural Sciences, emphasized that Penn State's distinction as the U.S. site underscores the college's commitment to providing solutions for global challenges such as hunger and climate change. He added that this recognition speaks to the University's reputation and leadership in engaging the next generation to tackle the world's most pressing issues.

"There is perhaps no greater challenge than ensuring everyone, regardless of where they live or their circumstances, has access to nutritious food," Ott said. "As we work toward making that a reality, we must empower young people — tomorrow's leaders — to actively pursue sustainable solutions. Our college is honored to lead this global initiative in North America; it speaks to the quality and reputation of our faculty, students and staff and their commitment to uplifting communities worldwide."



According to the United Nations, as of 2023, about 735 million people globally suffer from hunger. This number has increased in recent years due to conflicts, economic downturns, weather disasters and the impact of climate change. The WFF Youth Innovation Labs initiative is aimed at engaging young people aged 18-35 in mitigating climate change and ending hunger.

Maria Spencer, the John and Patty Warehime Entrepreneur in Residence, will lead the lab at Penn State. It will be housed in the [Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education](#) and supported by the college's [Ag Sciences Global](#) unit, the [Office for Research and Graduate Education](#), the [Office of Entrepreneurship and Innovation](#), and the [Penn State Learning Factory](#).



Spencer said the lab will provide opportunities for hands-on competitions, including research and startup challenges, incubator and accelerator programs, boot camps, and networking events. Select participants also will participate in master classes taught by renowned experts and emerging leaders focused on cultivating innovation for a more sustainable food future.

She credited Penn State's extensive agricultural research portfolio and exceptional agricultural and extension education programs as key factors in its selection.

"The College of Agricultural Sciences understands that food security is integral to global security," Spencer said. "We excel in agricultural research and education, and our core values align with the World Food Forum's mission to develop bold, actionable solutions that ensure access to healthy, sustainable food for all."

Spencer noted that the college's renowned [Global Teach Ag Network](#) also put the University at the forefront of the selection process. The program will provide valuable expertise in developing and delivering programs for agricultural educators across North America and beyond.

Co-founded by Daniel Foster, associate professor of agricultural and extension education, and Melanie Miller Foster, associate teaching professor of international agriculture, the online community connects educators with global experts, organizations, practitioners and businesses to address the complex challenges and opportunities within agriculture, food and natural resources education.

Daniel Foster noted that with an estimated 85 million teachers worldwide, approximately 35% of whom are under age 35, the potential for the World Food Forum Youth Innovation Labs — including the Penn State site — to make a significant impact is immense.

“Educators are powerful agents of change, capable of influencing communities and spreading innovation, one learner at a time,” he said. “Through this new lab at Penn State, we see an incredible opportunity for exponential impact by investing in young educators. These educators have the potential to inspire future generations through agricultural education, creating a ripple effect that fosters innovation and positive change in their communities.”

In the coming months, Spencer and college leaders, including Deanna Behring, assistant dean and director of Ag Sciences Global, will solicit partners — including industry, foundations and other stakeholders — to develop the lab and guide its direction. Lab partners will be asked to help mentor and guide youth innovators while themselves benefitting from a consortium approach to tackling the challenges of sustainability, hunger and climate change.

“We know this lab will help ignite a wave of youth mentorship and collaboration to aid in tackling the planet’s most urgent food and climate needs,” Behring said. “We look forward to building new partnerships to make this a reality.”

For more information about the World Food Forum Youth Food Lab at Penn State or to inquire about partnership opportunities, contact Spencer at [mtk15@psu.edu](mailto:mtk15@psu.edu).



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