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Ill. law to boost demand for locally grown food

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill.

Illinois state agencies would have to buy more locally grown food under a law Gov. Pat Quinn signed Tuesday.

The measure sets up a system in which state agencies would purchase 20 percent of the food for prisons and other facilities from local sellers by 2020. State-funded institutions such as public schools would shoot for 10 percent locally purchased food by 2020.

"It's important for the future that we eat right, grow right and, as much as possible, buy local," Quinn told a crowd gathered for Agriculture Day at the Illinois State Fair.

Even though farmland makes up 80 percent of Illinois, more than 90 percent of all the fruits, vegetables and meat that Illinois residents eat are produced outside its borders, said the legislation's sponsor, Sen. Jacqueline Collins, D-Chicago.

The law, which takes effect immediately, creates the "Local Food, Farms and Jobs Council" to boost the market for Illinois farm produce. The council will coordinate those efforts with state agencies and private businesses.

"It will increase dramatically the availability of fresh and healthy foods for Chicago's underserved areas while also expanding local markets for our Illinois farmers," Collins said.

On another subject, Quinn said if unionized state employees would agree to a wage freeze and unpaid furlough days, it could lessen the need to lay off 2,600 workers in the budget crisis.

"It would be getting there pretty close," Quinn said. "That would be very helpful. But it has to be a decision made by the worker through the union."

Quinn and leaders of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees met Monday for more than an hour to discuss the Democratic governor's budget-cutting measures. AFSCME urged him to forgo layoffs, supporting instead a Quinn-proposed income tax increase that failed in the Legislature.

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