

## Growers donate fruit to families going hungry in drought

Despite suffering drought-related hardship of its own, a coalition of Central Valley growers and businesses has donated more than \$100,000 in produce to food banks assisting families affected by the drought.

The group is called California Water Feeds Our Communities, and on Wednesday it delivered 15 truckloads of locally-grown fresh fruits to 10 cities throughout the state, including Bakersfield through Community Action Partnership of Kern, or CAPK.

"Even though we're in a drought situation, we have many people who are respectful of the need and want to make sure that food grown in the Central Valley gets to families who can really use it," said Gayle Holman, a spokeswoman for the Westlands Water District, which is part of the coalition.

All together, the group donated 1,116 boxes of fruit, including 360 boxes of honeydew, 270 boxes of peaches, 324 boxes of nectarines and 162 boxes of plums.

In addition to Bakersfield, they went to Fresno, Los Angeles, Merced, Oxnard, Riverside, Salinas, Santa Maria, San Diego and Watsonville.

A UC Davis study, Economic Analysis of the 2014 Drought for California Agriculture, concluded in July that the state has lost 17,100 seasonal and full-time jobs in agriculture because of California's worst drought in more than a century.

Ironically, it is workers who make their living in food production who are now at high risk for going hungry because growers have been forced to cut back for lack of irrigation.

"Even before the drought, Kern County had one of the highest food insecure rates in the nation," said Jeremy Tobias, executive director of CAPK. "So we already had a bad situation, and the drought is just adding to that."

After Gov. Jerry Brown declared a drought emergency in January, food bank Foodlink, in partnership with the California Department of Social Services, began distributing non-perishable food to families affected by the drought.

CAPK has been working with Foodlink to distribute that food since May. About 31,000 boxes went out in the first phase, and another 47,000 boxes started rolling out last month.

The produce donated Wednesday supplements that program, which is offering canned fruits and vegetables, rice, beans, oatmeal and other food with a long shelf life.

CAPK food bank manager Ken White said he knows the region has always had problems with large numbers of people going hungry, but the last few years have been especially difficult.

"We have agencies who we've given a month's worth of food coming back to us halfway, three-quarters of the way through the month asking for more because they've run out," White said.

Anyone who doesn't have enough food to eat, whether due to drought or some other reason, is encouraged to call 2-1-1. That's a referral hotline that directs callers to food distribution centers by zip code.

Copyright © 2014 The Bakersfield Californian

