

State farmers encouraged to donate produce to food bank

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California farmers are being encouraged to donate any surplus produce or secondary product as part of a statewide effort to boost the supply of fresh fruits and vegetables among the state's network of food banks.

The campaign is being led by a coalition of organizations, including the California Department of Food and Agriculture, California Grown, Ag Against Hunger, and the Young Farmers and Ranchers Committee.

The groups have joined the California Association of Food Banks to increase the amount of contributions to 200 million pounds annually. The association accepts the food through its Farm to Family program. This year, Farm to Family accepted 150 million pounds of fruits, vegetables, nuts, dairy and other products.

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Karen Ross, secretary, California Department of Food and Agriculture

Karen Ross, secretary of the California Department of Food and Agriculture, was in Fresno on Wednesday at the Community Food Bank to thank the farmers for contributing and to encourage others to donate. She was joined by food bank officials and members of the agriculture community. December is Farm to Food Bank Month.

Ross said she was amazed that in the fourth year of a drought, farmers were able to donate 150 million pounds of food.

"It is incredibly important to say thank you," Ross said.

But Ross and food bank officials said the problem of hunger is ongoing.

Andy Souza, chief executive officer of the Community Food Bank, said the Farm to Family program has provided thousands of families in the San Joaquin Valley with fresh and healthy produce. Last year, the food bank received 17 million pounds of donated produce. Souza's 10-year goal is to increase that to 40 million pounds.

On average, about 30 farming companies donate to the food bank, and Souza would also like to see that increase.

One company that has become a regular supplier is Fowler Packing.

Jim Bates, chief financial officer at Fowler, said the company has been involved with the food bank for 20 years. Bates said company officials got involved after growing tired of seeing edible fruit being used as cattle feed or worked back into the dirt because it did not meet grocery store standards. The fruit may be the wrong size or have a slight blemish.

"This fruit is perfectly edible, it's nutritious, so we decided to get it into the hands of those who need it," Bates said.

Fowler Packing donates 1.5 million to 2 million pounds of fresh fruit annually to the Community Food Bank.

Bates also reminded farmers that they can receive a state tax credit for donating.

For more information about the Farm to Family program, visit the California Association of Food Banks at www.cafoodbanks.org.

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