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Agriculture community supports Food Share

Emergency food boxes will contain green beans grown by volunteers

By Jan Jackson

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At a time when nearly 6,000 families access emergency food boxes each month from the Marion-Polk Food Share network, several unlikely partners have come up with an outside-the-box solution to increasing food supplies — grow food intended specifically for the food bank.

This summer, the Food Share partnered with local NORPAC farmers, agriculture suppliers, county and state corrections departments, and Truitt Bros. Inc. to produce 20,000 cans of freshly processed green beans, which will soon be heading to Marion-Polk Food Share.

The unprecedented cooperative effort started in earnest in July when volunteers from Five Oak Farms planted the seeds on an 18-acre field belonging to the Santiam Correctional Institution in southeast Salem near Aumsville Highway.

Leading up to this plant date, Marion Ag Service and Wilco Agronomy donated lime and fertilizers to aid crop development.

Volunteers from Keudell Farms, Butler Farms, Iverson Family Farms and Mark Lewis Farms used their own tractors and equipment to prepare the soil beds.

"Everyone involved is ready to do it again next year even though we encountered all kinds of problems that affected our crop yield," said Brian Haley, food resource manager for Marion-Polk Food Share.

"The investment all our partners put into this project is truly amazing," Haley said. "One of the many things I learned in coordinating the project was that a lot more goes into producing our food than simply going to the store to pick up a can of beans."

The field was originally estimated to be 30-acres and projected to produce 200,000 cans of beans. Once planted, the field actually measured 18-acres and the 20,000 cans gained from the program was enough to create a win-win situation for everyone involved.

Marion County Corrections will continue to use the fallow land to provide work experience for inmates and the State Corrections is re-evaluating the boundary lines to bring the amount of arable land from this year's 18-acres back up to the projected 30-acres.

The water resources are also being worked out and hopefully additional acreage will be allocated to grow corn which would be processed and packaged by another local cannery.

The unique program is one where the farmers, the ag community and Truitt Bros. all had the opportunity to use their knowledge and equipment to create a positive solution for local hunger

issues, and local food banks received a much needed boost in its food supply.

"We had problems with the watering part of the program but no one is daunted," said John Burt, executive director of Farmers Ending Hunger. "It is a unique program and everyone is committed and getting geared up to do it again next year."

Between July 1, 2007, and June 30, 2008, Marion-Polk Food Share distributed an average of 5,824 food boxes per month and served just short of one million off-site meals in the Salem-Keizer area alone.

Distribution was up 15 percent over the previous year and it is already up another 10 percent this year. Thanks to this project, many of the food boxes families receive this year will contain canned or fresh beans grown on the 18-acre pilot farm.

Truitt Bros., Inc., a Salem based processing company with a shelf stable food plant in West Salem and a cannery on Front Street, is also looking forward to working with the project next year.

"It is exciting to be part of the project," said Sue Root, operations manager for Truitt Bros. "It has potential and we plan on being part of the agronomy and culture of a community that makes it happen. We have already scheduled a meeting this month to evaluate our first attempt and figure out how to do it better next year."

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