

Oregon Food Bank credits farmers with contribution surge

Extension of tax credits for crop donations is a win for hungry people in Oregon and Southwest Washington, says the CEO of the Oregon Food Bank.

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Susannah Morgan, CEO of the Oregon Food Bank, delivered her first “State of Hunger” address to the Oregon Board of Agriculture in mid-December.

PORTLAND — Hunger in Oregon is leveling off thanks in part to a growing collaboration with the state’s farmers and their donations of surplus fruit and produce, the Oregon Food Bank’s chief executive said,

That’s not to say the problem is solved. Food Bank CEO Susannah Morgan said 800,000 people in Oregon and Southwest Washington, one-in-five residents, go hungry at times.

“If this was a disease we would call it an epidemic,” Morgan said. “This is a crisis.”

But for now the hunger numbers don’t appear to be increasing, Morgan said in speech this month to the Oregon Board of Agriculture. The board toured the Food Bank’s operations in Portland and helped pack some food for distribution.

In her speech to the board and in a followup interview, Morgan said Oregon’s farmers have greatly increased their contributions of fresh fruit and produce. The Oregon Food Bank and others nationally primarily received and distributed canned and boxed food in the past, but the state organization set a goal of increasing vegetable and fruit distribution by 50 percent over multiple years.

Instead, with farmers pouring in an additional 2 million pounds of potatoes, carrots, onions, pears, apples and other crops, the Food Bank blew that goal out of the water in one year, Morgan said.

The Food Bank takes in produce that is surplus, blemished or otherwise not suitable for commercial markets. Food is distributed through a network of four bank branches and 17 independent regional food banks serving Oregon and Clark County, Washington.

While the food bank can’t afford to pay farmers much for food — or anything in many cases — state and federal legislation now encourage crop donation.

The 2014 Oregon Legislature passed a law giving farmers a 15 percent tax credit on the wholesale price of their donation. As part of a federal spending bill passed in mid-December, Congress permanently extended an enhanced tax deduction for charitable contributions of food by businesses.

Morgan said the possibility of no one in the region missing a meal is “doable in my lifetime.”

“It’s partly in our grasp because of our new and growing relationship with farmers,” she said.

In her talk to the ag board, Morgan said low income is the single biggest reason people ask for food assistance. About 72 percent of recipients live at or below the federal poverty line. More than a third of them are retired or disabled.

“Hunger hurts the most vulnerable,” Morgan told the ag board. She said 52 percent of recipient households have children, 20 percent are elderly and 20 percent have a veteran in the household makeup.

“This is the population that we continue to try and serve,” Morgan said. “Hunger remains a steady, persistent and excruciating large problem in our state and in our region.”

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