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Feeding an economy

Project focuses on local food growth to support farmers and buyers

Patrick Alexander
The News Guard



Josh Armstrong is chef de cuisine at Blackfish Café, which buys almost all its produce, fish, meats and cheeses from local suppliers. He said figuring out how to use local ingredients "keeps your brain healthy"
-News Guard photo by Patrick Alexander

Farmers and buyers will be brought together in the same room next month as part of the Lincoln City Food Project, which aims to increase the availability of locally grown food.

"It's important to do what we can to support the local farmers," Mayor Lori Hollingsworth said. "They're small businesses, they're entrepreneurs, they are our neighbors."

Hollingsworth said the project aims to strengthen the Lincoln City Farmers Market and improve the ability of farmers to meet the needs of other buyers such as grocery stores, restaurants and food pantries.

"The real test is going to be long-lasting relationships," she said

The project is one of five wellness initiatives chosen by the office of Gov. Ted Kulongoski to receive support from Oregon Solutions, a Portland State University program dedicated to finding sustainable answers to community problems.



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That support takes the form of Rosemarie Cordello, who has been contracted by Oregon Solutions to facilitate a series of meetings, culminating in a declaration of cooperation between all parties involved.

Cordello, president of the Portland Farmers Market, said focusing on local food promotes economic development by encouraging people to start farming or expand existing farms as well as improving health by making it easier to buy fresh, nutritious ingredients.

She said local production also increases food security, preventing an area being at the mercy of vulnerable distribution lines and making it easier for people to know where their food comes from.

"Local food connects urban residents with their rural counterparts," she said, "knitting a community more tightly together."

The project team has arranged an all-day workshop for March 3 at the Pacific Coast Center for the Culinary Arts to bring growers and buyers together.

Sam Angima, agriculture agent with the OSU extension, said the workshop would allow each party to understand what the other wants.

"We get those points on the board, and everyone knows the expectations," he said. "What can you produce? How much can you produce? How much can you accept as payment? What seasons can you grow what in?"

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2007 census, Lincoln County, with its 371 farms, is the least productive county in the state when it comes to growing food.

On the bright side, the number of farms in the county has remained almost unchanged since 2002, in contrast to a statewide decline of 4 percent.

One of the project's key goals is to attract more farmers, and more customers, to the Lincoln City Farmers Market, held on Sundays from May to September at the Lincoln City Cultural Center.

The project team plans to distribute a questionnaire to gauge whether the market's location and operating hours are convenient for customers and also plans to contact farmers to ask for feedback.

Sarah Walker has been farming about 20 acres near Siletz along with her husband, Randy, for the past three years, selling meat, fowl and now produce at the Newport Farmers' Market as well as supplying several local restaurants.

They have buyers for almost all their products and are expanding to meet demand, but Walker said not all the county's farmers are as fortunate.

"I would like to see all of the local farmers be in a situation where they don't take food home at the end of farmers market and don't have food going to waste," she said.

Rob Pounding, of the Blackfish Café, is a longtime advocate of using local food and has been



buying produce from farmer Hugh Rackleff for the past 20 years.

"We meet every winter and go through a seed catalog," Pounding said. "He tells me what he wants to grow. I tell him what I need."

Pounding has a similar arrangement with Craig and Susie Wenrick, who fish out of Pacific City.

"I'll tell them I'm going to buy 60 pound of rockfish a week, guaranteed," he said. "Then it's up to me to sell it."

Pounding said using what is available keeps his kitchen staff on their toes and requires the restaurant to laser-print its menus due to last-minute changes.

"When Hugh brings in the produce, that's when we write the menu," he said. "The food dictates what you are going to do, which is really the essence of good cooking anyway."

Mike Barnes, manager of Price 'N Pride, is also involved in the project and is looking forward to stocking freshly harvested produce.

"Our wholesaler does offer organic but by the time we get it, it's not in the best of shape," he said. "With the local guys, they are going to harvest it in the morning and you are going to see it on the shelves in the afternoon."

Andy Morgan, general manager of Kenny's, is not taking part in the project.

He said the City's interest in local food production is at odds with its support of a proposed system of marine reserves along the coast, which would be off-limits to extractive activity such as fishing and crabbing.

"We are trying to kill off fishing off of our coast, creating marine reserves. That pretty much eliminates the fishing part of it."

Hollingsworth rejected the charge.

"Marine reserves help fish. Marine reserves help fishermen," she said. "The scientific information on that is clear."

Morgan also said the coastal climate is an obstacle to local farming.

"This is not an area where we are going to grow a considerable amount of fruits and vegetables," he said. "I really don't think that's the best use of our energy. What we need to do is create living-wage jobs in Lincoln County, and this isn't one of them."

The Walkers disagree, saying that, with the right technology, Lincoln County farmers can grow anything that can be grown in the Valley.

"We grow watermelon, we grow cantaloupes, honeydew, tomatoes," Randy Walker said. "We can do it. We just have to convince ourselves we can do it. We are our own worst enemy."

Joyce Thompson Graham, agency relations coordinator for Lincoln County Food Share, said she wants to see local food in the county's food pantries and hopes the workshop will give a clear idea of the extra cost involved.

"I want to have fresh food on the shelves as well as canned apple sauce," she said. We get food that feeds bellies but my goal is that we also have food that sustains life and sustains the community."

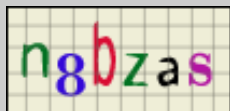
Any growers or buyers interested in attending the March 3 workshop should call Hollingsworth at 994-3328.

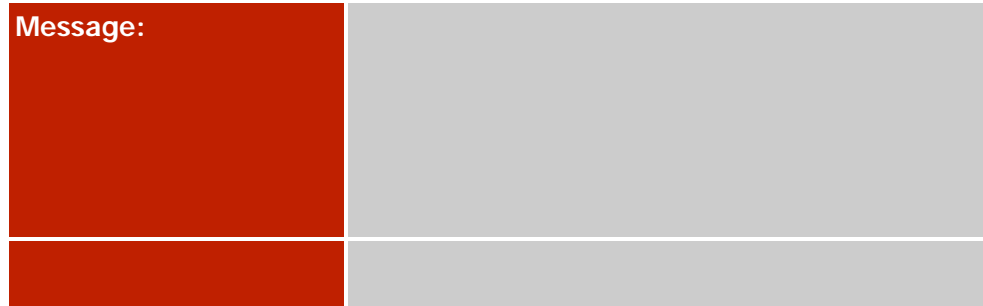
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