

Case Study

Food Rescue Program: Waste Prevention and Hunger Relief

Background: Listening to our moms

Remember when your mother told you, “Eat all your dinner. Children are going hungry.” Our mothers knew it made no sense to waste food while others suffered. You only need to look at the recent Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) study showing the amount of food that goes to landfills each year, and recent reports that place Oregon as one of the states for families considered to be food insecure, to know our mothers were right.

The 2000 Oregon Waste Composition Study published by DEQ showed that food waste makes up about 16% of all the materials going to landfills. While it is not known how much edible food is being sent to landfills, even if 1 percent was recovered, it would mean nearly nine million pounds of food would be available to food banks.



The onions will be packed into 25- and 50-lb. bags

Forming a new partnership

The Oregon Food Bank (OFB) is always looking for new ways to get additional food into its distribution center in Portland. When Harry Wornath, OFB food resource developer, heard that onion producers were sending hundreds of tons of onions to the landfill and that DEQ was willing to give grants to get food out of the waste stream, he knew he was on to something. But that was just the start of the partnership; before the project was under way it would include DEQ, the Oregon Food Bank, the city of Ontario, the Oregon Department of Corrections, HJ Heinz Co. and eastern Oregon onion producers.

Onion Recovery Project

The goal of the Onion Recovery Project was to eliminate up to 750,000 pounds a season of edible onions that would otherwise go to the landfill and instead distribute them to emergency food banks.

Transportation costs can be a real challenge.

“There are a lot of exciting things about this project,” says Martine Roberts-Pillon, DEQ project coordinator, “but I’m thrilled that such a diverse group was brought together from across the state and the program is running so smoothly.”

OFB crafted the program and coordinated all of the partners. For DEQ’s part, the Solid Waste Section provided grant funds totaling just over \$38,000 for two years to pay for a driver, some staff costs and supplies. The grant program, established by the Legislature in 1991 to help local governments reach their waste recovery goals, is funded through fees on solid waste disposed in landfills.

The city of Ontario managed the grant in addition to donating the use of a flatbed truck and providing coordination with the local driver.

A critical link was made with the Oregon Department of Corrections’ Restorative Justice Program. Inmates from the Snake River Correctional Institution participate in the community service project, donating labor to sort and bag the onions.

How it all works

Between September and April three onion packinghouses in Ontario in eastern Oregon donate grade 2 and 3 onions, which are transported by the flatbed truck to the HJ Heinz Co. warehouse for sorting. Five onion packing companies are now participating. “This portion of the building is idle a majority of the year. It’s a great opportunity to recoup onions, having an environmental benefit as well as feeding the hungry,” says Joe Plaza, factory services manager, Ore-Ida Foods, HJ Heinz Co.

The onions are packed in 25- and 50-pound bags and placed on pallets for shipping. The inmates must be within three years of probation and considered low risk. “The inmates ask to be part of the program. They feel they’re making a contribution to helping the community,” states Betty Carter, work skills coordinator, at the Snake River Correctional Institute. “The food bank is a non-profit organization dependent on volunteers, so the inmates are not taking jobs out of the market.”



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References

USDA Good Samaritan Food
Donation Act
www.usda.gov/news/pubs/gleaning/appc.html

Oregon Good Samaritan Law
ORS Chapter 30.890
www.landru.leg.state.or.us/030.html

The repackaged onions are shipped to OFB's distribution center in Portland, a trip of more than 350 miles one way on a bi-weekly basis. But no costs are incurred because the Oregon Department of Corrections trucks that have delivered supplies to the prison back haul the onions to Portland.

From Portland the onions are shipped to 20 regional food banks throughout Oregon serving more than 800 local hunger relief organizations. About half of the onions are now being shipped to the neighboring states of Washington, Idaho and California.



Onions arrive at the OFB distribution center in Portland

Meeting the challenges

"There've been plenty of challenges," says Bob Morris, who took over the OFB food resource developer position soon after it started. "There always is when you're a non-profit working with folks statewide. We must always look for ways to cut corners and get as many things donated as possible. But so far we have been able to overcome the challenges."

Some of the details that had to be worked out included mechanizing the bagging process, locating and repairing needed equipment, tracking the amount of onions available and determining where they will be shipped, standardizing bag weights and tracking donations and costs. "All fresh produce is tricky to ship, but onions have a particularly short shelf life," Bob explains. "After two years the efficiency has increased, the program has been able to ship more than 40,000 pounds a week and the onions are arriving in good shape."

Program's future

The program's future will continue to offer great opportunity and great challenges. DEQ grant money will run out. But the Oregon Food Bank continues to work to make the project self-sustaining. Neighboring states have begun to fund their own transportation, and in the future the program may become connected with America's Second Harvest, a national food bank network to distribute onions nationally. This would yield additional financial support.

"Sure there will be more challenges," states OFB's Morris. "But the really good news is that there are enough onions in Eastern Oregon to provide to emergency food providers across the country. On top of that, we have proven that it can be done."

So, who wants to eat onions?

Onions get a bad rap, but they're a good vegetable! The onion is known for its nutritional value and has moderate amounts of protein, fat, fiber and healthy amounts of calcium, phosphorous and potassium. The goal of many of the food banks in the state is to provide well-balanced meals, which means diversifying from the dried beans, pasta and canned goods typically available. Besides, what's a good pot of soup without onions?

Reaching Oregon waste reduction goals

DEQ's Food Rescue Program is trying to help Oregon's food recovery agencies collect edible food from produce warehouses, groceries, institutions and restaurants. (see Web page at: <http://www.deq.state.or.us/wmc/solwaste/rsw.htm>)

Getting organic materials out of the waste stream is an important part of Oregon's goal to reach a 50% recovery rate by 2009. There are about a million tons of organics generated each year (500,000 tons of yard debris and 500,000 tons of food waste.) But most of the yard debris (65%) is being composted while only a fraction of food waste is (6%).

Like yard debris, food waste can be composted. While it is a more complicated process, a number of local jurisdictions and composters are setting up food waste composting systems that could greatly reduce food from the wastestream.

"Food rescue programs won't reduce the food wastestream by great amounts," says Roberts-Pillon. "These programs reduce waste by pounds, not tons, like composting can. But this is waste prevention -- not creating waste in the first place."

It all goes back to listening to our moms -- Don't waste food when others are going hungry.

Alternative formats

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A grocery cart ready to be filled. The refrigerator holds repackaged food from institutions and restaurants.



Fresh vegetables from local groceries will be added.



Onions from the Ontario onion project will help to provide a variety of food.

The onions will be added to the grocery cart along with fresh vegetables from local grocery stores and repackaged "prepared but not served" main courses donated by institutions and restaurants to provide well balanced meals for emergency food clients.