

*Latest statistics show 14.6% of all households don't have consistent access to food*

## Household food security drops in Oregon and US

**January 27, 2010...** Both Oregon and the United States have seen a jump in households that lack consistent access to adequate amounts of nutritious food. At the same time, agriculture faces a major challenge of producing enough food and finding a way to get it to those in need. In some cases, farmers and ranchers themselves are facing food insecurity. The issue has been top of mind among those associated with agriculture, especially as the overall economy has struggled.

“For those of us that do have access to food, we need to be thankful and figure out a way to keep from losing ground when it comes to families’ food security,” says Katy Coba, director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture. “How are we going to feed Americans and Oregonians in 2010, 2015, and 2020? Right now, production isn’t the big problem. It’s more a case of getting food to folks who need it in a way they can afford it. That’s the larger challenge.”

Starting next week, Governor Kulongoski’s month long State Employees Food Drive begins, one of many efforts year around to stem the rising tide of hunger in Oregon. While state workers donate food and money, agricultural producers are being encouraged to continue their generosity as they are able.

“One of Governor Kulongoski’s highest priorities throughout both terms in office has been combatting hunger in Oregon,” says Coba. “Our state was once listed as being the hungriest in the nation. We dropped to a lower level. Unfortunately, we are now back up to number two among all states.”

In the latest study of food security, the US Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service (ERS) has compiled statistics through 2008. It shows that 85.4 percent of US households— about 100 million households— were food secure through the year 2008. That means those households had consistent access to enough food for active healthy lives for all members at all times during the year. The remaining 14.6 percent— or about 17 million households— were food insecure. At some time during the year, those households had trouble providing enough food for all members due to a lack of resources. The food insecurity figure is up from 11.1 percent in 2007 and is the highest on record since such surveys were initiated in 1995. The number for 2009, when finalized, are expected to be worse.

In Oregon, 13.1 percent of households experienced food insecurity over a three-year period from 2006 through 2008. That’s up from 11.9 percent in the previous three-year period. In a sub-category of “very low food security”— which is also considered “hunger”— only Mississippi had a high rate of households than Oregon’s 6.6 percent.

While agriculture is among those challenged to meet the needs of a hungry population, Coba reminds everyone that farm and ranch families are not exempt from hardship.

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“Often times, it is Oregon farmers and ranchers that can fall into the category of being food insecure. So, in a way, not only are those in agriculture working to help our urban cousins, we are working to help ourselves.”

According to the Oregon Food Bank, about 66.2 million pounds of food was distributed in this past year, which is the highest amount doled out by the statewide network in a single year. Emergency food boxes through the network increased 14 percent and more than 20 percent in some areas of the state. About 36 percent of those being fed by emergency food boxes were children.

Whether it is the broader category of food insecurity or the more specific category of hunger, agricultural producers in Oregon have spent the past couple of years helping where it can. A group called Farmers Ending Hunger continues to step forward.

"The U.S. Department of Agriculture used to contribute as much as 50 percent of the food donated to the Oregon Food Bank Network, now that has dropped to about 10 percent," says John Burt, executive director of Farmers Ending Hunger. "Now it's up to the food industry and agriculture to make up the difference. What we are all about is providing fresh, high quality local food products right out of harvest. It often doesn't need processing and can come directly into the warehouse."

The concept is simple. Farmers agree to donate a portion of their crop prior to harvest. Processors agree to donate a portion of the cost of processing. Farmers Ending Hunger raises funds to pay for the remaining processing, packaging, and transportation. The public participates through the unique “Adopt an Acre” program to help pay the cost of getting the product processed and delivered to the food bank.

In 2009, Farmers Ending Hunger was able to provide 2.1 million pounds of food derived from Oregon agriculture. That included 660,000 pounds of fresh potatoes, 300,000 pounds of onions, 50,000 pounds of hamburger processed from donated cattle, and 225,000 pounds, or five truck loads, of pancake mix donated by Oregon’s wheat industry. The donations have increased but are having a tough time keeping up with demand.

Anyone interested in getting involved with Farmers Ending Hunger can visit the organization’s Web site at <http://www.farmersendinghunger.com>.

“Farmers and processors are committed to providing more of our agricultural production to feed Oregon’s hungry,” says ODA’s Coba. “I would expect to see Oregon agriculture step up even more. That’s the kind of producers we have in our state and across the nation.”

Hunger and food insecurity are global problems, and with the projected world population increase over the next three decades, pressure will build for agriculture to increase its production capability. How feasible that is remains to be seen but it will definitely be a challenge in the years to come.

“We must be willing to make the effort,” says Coba.

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