Extra crops may still feed needy

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The Farmers Against Hunger program, which was forced to cease operations last week due to lack of funding, may be salvaged through grant money the Department of Agriculture made available Wednesday.

The anti-poverty program, which had been delivering over 1.5 million pounds of free fresh fruits and vegetables annually to those in need — required about $100,000 for its operations annually. In 2006, it kept itself afloat through a $50,000 grant from the state Department of Community Affairs.

See Food Page A7
That grant was no longer available this year, prompting Farmers Against Hunger to announce suspension its gleaning operations at a press conference held at the Giamarese Farm in East Brunswick last week.

The state Agriculture Department announced Wednesday that $100,000 in grant funding is now available for “gleaning” programs such as Farmers Against Hunger — which collect produce using volunteers, as well as inmates from the Department of Corrections — from fields after harvests. Perfectly fine fruits and vegetables missed by pickers on first pass are salvaged instead of being plowed under.

Some 60 farms throughout the state had agreed to take part in the program in which the “gleaned” produce is delivered to churches and food pantries to help the poor.

“‘This is something we’ve been working on for a long time, a natural progression of the programs we have right now,’” said Department of Agriculture spokeswoman Lynne Richmond. “‘We’ve been wanting to bring the gleaning operations into it.’”

The department operates the State Food Purchase Program, which is the source of the funding to be made available to gleaning organizations that have been in operation for a minimum of two years. This year, Gov. Jon S. Corzine and the state Legislature have allocated $4 million for the State Food Purchase Program, with a focus on buying locally produced nutritious foods.

“We will obviously be applying for the grant funding,” said Judy Grignon, program director for Farmers Against Hunger. “I think the state is figuring out here, after all, what the healthy foods are here and how to make (nutrition initiatives) work.”

The Farmers Against Hunger program had been serving some 6,000 people per week. About 60 farms throughout the state have participated in its gleaning program.