FREE FOOD FIZZLES

Lack of N.J. funds kills program

By GENE RAGZ
STAFF WRITER

EAST BRUNSWICK: For lack of $100,000 in funding, millions of pounds of fresh produce distributed to the needy may be left to rot in New Jersey fields.

That was the message delivered Thursday morning on the East Brunswick farm of Jim Giamease, who announced that the Farmers Against Hunger program will cease operations by Saturday. The program, begun in 1996, was delivering over 1.5 million pounds of free fresh fruit and vegetables annually to those in need — serving some 6,000 people per week.

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The program collects the produce with volunteers, as well as inmates in the New Jersey state prison system, who glean fields after harvests — gathering produce missed by pickers on first pass. Instead of plowing under the surplus, 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.

"The Governor's Hunger Initiative wants to get nutritious food to citizens, so why are you going to pay for food when you can get it for free?" asked Giamease at a press conference Thursday morning.

"There's some language in the budget that says money is to be used to purchase foods, but not for gleaning groups or not for free. I still scratch my head. This is the end of very successful program."

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Across from Giamarese's Farm on Fresh Ponds Road, a gleaning crew was gathering produce from a plot Giamarese sets aside for the program. A load of turnips, mustard greens, collards, kale, cabbage and broccoli would be loaded onto the truck by midday, delivered to 10 locations in the Trenton area, and be on dinner tables by the evening.

"Based on efficiency, this program is more efficient than any program in the state — I mean, it comes out to about 8 cents a pound," said Chip Paillex, a Pitstown farmer who participates in a program call Grow-A-Row, which contributes about 110,000 pounds of produce each year for Farmers Against Hunger.

"There's no way you can find produce for 8 cents a pound," added Paillex. "Here's an opportunity to get fresh produce to those who need nutrition and not just processed food. If they don't pick it up, it rots. The amount of money to keep this program going is a drop in the bucket."

So for lack of roughly $500 in gas per week plus expenditures for insurance and a driver, the Farmers Against Hunger program is done for now. Program Director Judy Grignon said ending the program is "mind boggling" and that she hopes legislators could step up and amend the problematic language of the statute which authorizes food to be purchased but not gleaned for free for nutrition initiatives.

"Stuff is amended all the time, every day, Can't we figure this out?" asked Grignon. "Farmers are supergenerous, and they don't like to see anything go to waste. And this is precisely the type of nutritious food that can help those who are suffering from things like heart disease and obesity."

Glenn Allen, a trustee at the Wayne Avenue Baptist Church in Trenton, said the regular food deliveries will be sorely missed by the people his church served. Frank Hasner, executive director of the Franklin Township Food Bank, echoed the sentiment.

"People in Franklin Township are losing a great nutritional benefit," said Hasner. "Whatever can be done to try to save this program, I think should be done."

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