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## Food supply to get back to its roots

**Ruth Roberts**

Published 04/04/2008 - 9:11 a.m. PDT

Here in East County, where 12,000 acres of abundant, fertile soils offer a year-round bounty of fruits and vegetables, a mere 30 or 40 miles away in west and central counties, school children are going without farm-fresh foods, and consumers continue to pay top dollar for imported Chilean strawberries and bananas.

All of which prompts the question: why not home grown? And in a unique moment of Zen last week, county supervisors answered with a resolution called Buy Fresh, Buy Local.

Authored by supervisors Mary Piepho and John Gioia, the Buy Fresh, Buy Local program is a farming sustainability project aimed at connecting East County farmers and their produce with schools, hospitals, food banks and other organizations throughout the county. "You know what?" said Piepho. "Our farmers should come first, and if we haven't done enough of that in the past, then shame on us. This is just one more effort and way to support our local farmers, and it's being met with great support."

Kathryn Lyddan, executive director of the Brentwood Agriculture Land Trust (BALT) and a proponent of the produce program, agrees that the time has come to connect the agriculture dots when it comes to providing healthful foods to residents in all corners of the county while simultaneously supporting the economic viability of farmers here at home.

"We (BALT) have increasingly been getting calls from places like John Muir Medical Center, the Richmond Children's Foundation and folks in urban areas who would like to bring local produce into those areas," said Lyddan. "And of course, our local economy benefits if we keep our food dollars within our own economy. It's a program where everyone involved can benefit."

Jim Becker, director of development for the Richmond Children's Foundation, an organization dedicated to the promotion of school and community revitalization, said that his foundation is 100 percent on board with the proposed food project.

"Our interest is in developing ways to bring farm-fresh foods to Richmond, because the availability of fresh produce is so limited out here," said Becker. "Contra Costa County has such a great bounty of fresh foods that some of these kids have never seen. We are certainly committed to helping this succeed."

Other benefits of the Buy Fresh, Buy Local program would also include an educational component, allowing students the opportunity to learn more about the payoffs of a healthy food lifestyle.

"Education is very important, especially in the schools as childhood obesity and diabetes continues to grow," said Piepho. "Peas don't grow in a can and a lot of kids don't know that. There are some (kids) who have never touched a fresh stalk of corn, for example. Having the opportunity to come out to the farms and see these things firsthand would be a wonderful experience for them."

With the project effectively underway, Piepho said the Board of Supervisors will receive a preliminary report and update from the primary organizers – the county agriculture and health services department and the UC Co-op extension program – at the June 3 Board of Supervisors meeting.

In the meantime, homegrown groups such as BALT will continue to work with local farmers on establishing links between groups and organizations to help put the program in motion.

"We will begin doing the initial work of seeing where the demands are and what is the supply," said Lyddan.

"How much, for example, do farmers need to sell their products for to make it worthwhile economically for them, and how can we find those markets that can produce that yield? Everyone is extremely enthusiastic about this program. It's very exciting."

For more information and updates on the Buy Fresh, Buy Local program, call Supervisor Piepho's Brentwood office at 925-240-7260, or BALT at 925-634-6738.



Farmer Rubin Peña works on a sprinkler in a cherry orchard in Byron. The newly proposed Buy Fresh, Buy Local program would allow local farmers in East County to provide their homegrown produce to needy groups and organizations throughout the county.

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