



## Direct Marketing Strategies

# Selling and Donating to Food Banks

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Washington State has an emergency food system composed of over 500 regional food banks, community food pantries, and meal programs according to the Washington State Department of Agriculture Food Assistance Programs. In 2013, the emergency food system supplied food to one in five Washington residents who experienced hunger. These organizations span every community across the state. Small and direct marketing farms can help tackle food insecurity by both donating and selling to food banks.

Historically, food banks gathered leftover or damaged boxes and cans from supermarkets, food processors and other distributors. This meant that food banks and pantries had very little fresh food to distribute. Increasingly, food banks and meal programs seek to increase the quality and quantity of fruits and vegetables they provide to clients. A growing number of emergency food system providers have dedicated funding (often supported through grants or community donations) to support the purchase of produce from local and regional farms. WSDA estimates that food banks are spending a minimum of \$7 million dollars per year on food from all sources. While this money is used to buy the items most needed for clients, these dollars may be also used to buy produce from farms.

Two markets of different scale in the emergency food system are interested in purchasing fresh farm products. Community or neighborhood pantries and meal programs (e.g., soup kitchens serving hot meals) are small and can lack sufficient cold storage for large quantities of highly perishable goods. Regional food banks have a multi-county reach, more money, greater storage, and are better suited for pallets, bins, or truckloads of produce. The emergency food system may buy anywhere from one case to multiple pallets of produce from farmers. In Skagit County, the Community Action Agency works with farmers to purchase excess produce at a very low price per pound.

Bellingham Food Bank does not just glean food from local farms; they also buy from local farms. Through their Food Bank Fresh and Winter Fresh purchasing projects, funded in part by a community foundation, the food bank and farmers build a crop list for the growing season, determine fair wholesale pricing, and forward contract for the harvest. This means that participating farmers are paid upfront for their contract. In its second year in 2014, Bellingham Food Bank has wholesale purchasing contracts with 11 farms, several of which are small and direct marketing farms, to grow and deliver \$80,000 in local produce along with \$40,000 in local dairy products. For more information, email [glean@bellinghamfoodbank.org](mailto:glean@bellinghamfoodbank.org) or call (360)739-5274.

Because food pantries, meal programs and food banks are primarily staffed with volunteers and may have infrequent hours, contact the purchase agent via email or phone to schedule an appointment. Be sure to share your product samples, a product list for the full season, your pricing, and delivery deadlines. To contact emergency food providers funded through WSDA, contact WSDA Food Assistance Programs at [foodassistance@agr.wa.gov](mailto:foodassistance@agr.wa.gov) or (360) 725-5640.

Developing partnerships with the emergency food system can benefit farmers and Washington residents who experience hunger. Many farms selling at farmers markets donate the product that does not sell at the market to their local food bank. The Neighborhood Farmers Market Alliance runs seven farmers markets in Seattle and tracks their food bank donations, contributing over 25,066 pounds of food in 2013.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms often donate shares to food banks. Some CSA farms offer food bank shares, where members can donate money for shares which the farm matches and then delivers directly to the local food bank. Many CSAs also donate shares to food banks that members do not pick up from delivery sites within operating hours.

Farms may also be interested in donating product through gleaning programs which organize volunteers to harvest seconds or designated produce at participating farms. Some gleaning programs will report the number of pounds of produce collected from that farm. The farm, in turn, may use this information in their marketing efforts to demonstrate their commitment to reaching low income residents with fresh fruits and vegetables. Connecting with food banks may increase the farm's visibility in the community beyond direct marketing channels.

The 1994 Good Samaritan Food Donation Law protects farmers from liability when donated food already meets all "quality and labeling standards imposed by federal, state, and local laws" for retail sales.

#### **Benefits of Selling to Food Banks, Food Pantries and Meal Programs**

- Opportunity to sell #2s and large quantities such as fruit or vegetable bins.
- Opportunity for annual contracting or custom growing.
- Possibility for long term buying relationship.
- Increasing demand for fresh produce.
- Established regional transportation network.
- Can be an outlet when harvest is more abundant than planned.

#### **Challenges of Selling to Food Banks, Food Pantries and Meal Programs**

- Commodity pricing substantially lower than wholesale.
- Limited capacity for perishable products.
- May not be able to sell enough quantity for profitability.
- Limited and inconsistent financial resources.
- High turnover rate amongst staff and volunteers.
- Irregular hours with limited staff/volunteer availability.

To connect with the emergency food system's larger distributors contact:

- Feeding Washington, call (509) 252-6286.
- Northwest Harvest
  - In Eastern Washington, call (509) 575-6596.
  - In Western Washington, call (206) 923-7448.
- Rotary First Harvest, call (206) 236-0408.

Additional statewide resources include:

- Washington Food Coalition: [www.wafoodcoalition.org](http://www.wafoodcoalition.org) or (206) 729-0501.

- The Washington State Department of Agriculture Food Assistance Programs:  
[www.agr.wa.gov/FoodProg](http://www.agr.wa.gov/FoodProg) or (360) 725-5640.
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## Recommended Fact Sheets

- 4. Licensing
- 7. Insurance
- 12. Selling to Grocery Stores and Food Co-ops
- 14. Selling to Schools and Other Institutions

*For further information, to provide comments, or suggest a resource to add to this fact sheet, please email [smallfarms@agr.wa.gov](mailto:smallfarms@agr.wa.gov) or call (360) 902-2888.*