

Rice donation from Conaway will feed thousands through Food Bank

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Kyriakos Tsakopoulos, president of Conaway Ranch, discusses Conaway growers donation of 160,000 pounds of rice for needy families at the Yolo County Food Bank on Tuesday. (Don Frances/Democrat)Farmers and politicians are common visitors to the warehouse of the Yolo County Food Bank in Woodland, but Tuesday was a bit special.

It was "an exciting day for the Food Bank," said Kevin Sanchez, the organization's executive director.

The excitement was due to a record-breaking donation by Conaway Ranch growers and owners: 160,000 pounds of rice, all dedicated to needy families throughout Yolo County.

"That's the single largest donation in the history of our organization," Sanchez said, adding that the rice will be distributed to hundreds of families countywide.

"It's our intent to do this on an annual basis," said Kyriakos Tsakopoulos, Conaway Ranch president, pointing to what could become a cherished food source for the county's poorer residents.

Tsakopoulos thanked the assembled group -- which included all five members of the County Board of Supervisors, Woodland Councilman Tom Stallard, county administrator Pat Blacklock and others -- and said he hopes more people will follow in the Conaway growers' footsteps.

Supervisor Jim Provenza seconded that idea, saying, "I'd like to see every farmer in the county who is able to contribute to these efforts."

An estimated 34,000 people are "food insecure" in Yolo County, meaning they do not know where their next meal will come from. The Food Bank reaches about 22,000 people per month countywide, according to Sanchez.

This particular donation, which would fill a warehouse were it all given at once, will be distributed over the coming weeks and months through the Food Bank's various programs, including the Christmas Food Distribution set for Dec. 22.

Mike DeWit, a Conaway grower, said they resolved to make the donation after considering, "We're pretty blessed. We have the resources and the ability to feed my family."

He added, "I'm probably spilling enough rice during my growing to feed a family."

Maya Kepner, a wildlife consultant for Conaway Ranch growers, said the idea for the donation stemmed from a conversation between her and Amanda McCarthy, the Food Banks' director of programs. But she added, "It was Mike DeWit and his dad (Jack DeWit) that really made it happen."

Sanchez said he wanted the labels on the bags of rice to clearly state who was behind the donation.

"To me this is relevant," he said.

"I want people to know this is a local product."

To sign up for the Food Bank's Christmas Food Distribution, qualifying residents can call 668-0648. More information is available at www.foodbankyc.org