

Food Banks Interested in More Avocados

By Tim Linden

Over the past decade, the amount of fresh produce distributed by food banks in California, as well as across the country, has increased significantly. Nationwide about one-third of all food distributed is fresh produce. In California the figure is even higher. “About half of what we distribute is fresh produce,” said Steve Linkhart, director of logistics for the California Association of Food Banks, which has its office in Oakland, CA.

The association represents 41 of the 49 food banks in the state. It often is the clearing house for donations, directing those food donations to the specific food banks that can use them on that particular day or week. Food banks have improved their efficiency, productivity and professionalism. They are distributing more meals and are working with donors on a very organized basis.

Linkhart said his group can arrange pickup and delivery and can also pay the grower a small picking fee if need be. He said that fee is only five to 10 cents per pound. While that will not cover the cost of picking, it might tip the scale in the favor of donation in some circumstances. The California Association of Food Banks calls its agricultural efforts the “Farm to Family” program. Linkhardt said the organization strives to make the process easy and efficient for all involved.

He said avocados are not an item that is often found at food banks but he makes the pitch that they should be. “If you can get these people who are down on their luck to eat avocados now, they will buy them when they can afford them later.”

Linkhart added that a hard avocado that isn’t going to ripen for 3 to 7 days is perfect for the food banks because it gives them an opportunity to position the fruit where it is needed without risk of it spoiling.

Echoing sentiments made by others, Phil Henry of Henry Avocado Corp., Escondido, CA, admits that donating avocados from the packing line to food banks is not something that happens very often. “Typically we don’t have any spoiled fruit like they might have in other commodities,” he said. “We do have buyers for every class of fruit. Even the fruit that is too ripe finds a home.” And for the growers that ship through Henry Avocado, the company’s president

said “we do a gleaning pick at the end of the year. What’s left is almost zero.”

Chris Dryden, regional manager for the field department for Mission Produce in Ventura County, is also a board member for that county’s food bank called Food Share Inc. The organization runs more than 100 pantries (typically a church location) in the county where individuals and families in need can come once or twice a week to pick up some free food. Last year, Dryden said Food Share collected 10 million pounds of fresh produce from local growers. He said not much of it was avocados but “from time to time we do get some avocados.” He said weather issues are typically the cause. “Last year we graded out a grove from a large grower that had gotten some freeze damage. When we finished, we told him he could either dump it or donate it and get the tax benefit. He ended up donating three bins of fruit to Food Share.”

He said another time a load coming into the port was rejected and diverted to the local food bank for some spotting issues. Because of food safety and other regulations, Dryden said the time has passed when a gleaning crew could follow a commercial crew into the field and take what’s left for charity. “But we still do what we can,” he said, urging other growers to follow suit if a situation arises that takes some avocados off of the commercial market.

Linkhart understands the challenges but agreed that if circumstances arise that would leave a grower or packer with any excess production, the California Association of Food Banks would happily take it off your hands and give you a tax-deductible donation receipt for the fair market value of the fruit. The State of California provides a 10 percent tax credit for fresh fruits and vegetables donated to food banks. California Form 3811 can be submitted with your tax returns to claim the earned donation credit. Linkhart said it is best to call the statewide association as it is in touch with the local organizations on a daily basis and knows where the needs are. 

(California Association of Food Banks and its member food banks can be reached via its website: cafoodbanks.org or by phone: 510-272-4435.)