

Farm to Pantry Grant By Sherice Shiner

During the growing season of 2020, the Food Bank Network of the San Luis Valley (FBNSLV) partnered with the San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition's Rio Grande Farm Park in an initiative called "Farm to Pantry" in which local farmers were paid to grow produce for the 15 food banks that comprise the Food Bank Network of the San Luis Valley.

The grant was born from an idea from then Rio Grande Farm Park Manager Jessie Marchildon. Marchildon believes that food is a right, and should be shared with those most affected by food insecurity in our communities. At the same time, local farmers notoriously have an uphill battle to be paid what their product is worth in terms of effort and energy; this program provides an equitable solution to balance the needs of all involved.

This partnership was made financially possible by The Colorado Health Foundation, and all 7 commercial farmers of the Rio Grande Farm Park participated in this effort. This project ran from July until September and provided over \$18,695 worth of produce, while benefiting over 3,490 people who utilized the food bank network during this time. This program supplied over 5,178 lbs of fresh produce to the 15 food banks of the valley!

Liza Marron, Director of the Local Foods Coalition said "Jesse Marchildon was instrumental in actualizing our mission to foster an equitable local food system here in the San Luis Valley, I'm thankful that farmers were able to grow for the food banks and so thankful constituents got to enjoy fresh, healthy local produce all summer long!" Katelyn, a La Puente 2020 Americorps who serves at the Alamosa food bank said "Everyone loves when we have fresh produce, and patrons are always looking for it. They are so happy at the variety and freshness of what we received this summer."

Cari, one of the farmers that participated this year, thought the program was awesome, and they really liked working with the Food Bank Network. She found that people were really excited for the specialty items she offered. She said, "at the farmers market things can go bad before selling, but this was a really easy way to sell my produce and helped me boost my business acumen." She also said it helped the farmers push their productivity and give them a solid foundation of financial stability.

Antonio Garcia, of Tierra Sana Organic Produce, commented that it was a great partnership between RGFP and the FBNSLV, in providing our community members locally grown and organic produce. It also provided access to healthier food while creating an awareness of organic farming. Antonio further elaborated, "Food is very beneficial and important for healthy lifestyles. Organic farming is more expensive and labor intensive than conventional farming, but healthier for our bodies and our earth."

Jesus Flores, the Current Rio Grande Farm Park manager and fellow commercial farmer, relayed a story about how a couple of years ago his zucchini was very productive, but without buyers and help to harvest, much of his acreage went to waste. He was heartbroken about the food languishing in the field, and as Manager works very hard to make sure he and his fellow

farmers have the help and support they need to get their produce to market. He sees this grant as an invaluable resource to make that happen.

Marge, the pantry leader for Crestone food bank, remarked, "This grant has been extremely helpful; produce, especially organic is always in high demand here in Crestone, as the population is very health conscious, and any produce is very much appreciated." She also talked about the synergistic relationship between the health of the people, the economy of the valley, and agricultural producers. She is especially excited that this grant makes healthy and fresh food available to low income people.

As the Healthy Food Access Coordinator for the FBNSLV, I can attest to the far reaching benefit this program has provided. Fresh produce is the number one item requested of me weekly. It is also one of the most challenging, because when we procure it from our supermarket partners, it can be past its prime nutritionally, or not able to last until an outlying food bank is open, as many of our pantries are only open one day a week. This adds yet another layer of challenge to provide fresh healthy produce to the farthest reaches of our network. This grant has truly been a blessing, both for our farming community and for our communities facing food insecurity.

This summer our local farmers took pride in providing their produce to those in need, and from Creede to Crestone, Saguache to Antonito, San Luis to Capulin, and all that lies between, the fruits of their labor were shared. The Food Bank Network of the San Luis Valley and I personally thank all who brought this grant to fruition this year.

Currently this grant project is slated to be funded for the 2021 year, however it's future after that is still to be determined.