

# The Important Link Between Food and Health



**By Mark Ozias,**  
*Clallam County Commissioner*

Here in Clallam County we spend a lot of time thinking about "local food," and with good reason! We have some of the most creative farmers and food producers in the country who grow and produce some of the finest food products available. My wife and I are reminded of how fortunate we are to live someplace with vibrant local food producers every time we travel somewhere else...the greens are never as sweet, nor is the meat as flavorful, nor is the milk as fresh as we enjoy every single day in Clallam County.

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As your County Commissioner I have learned that while on the one hand we enjoy access to the healthiest and best food anywhere, on the other hand we experience some of the highest food and diet-related chronic illness statistics in the state: 74 percent of Clallam County adults are overweight or obese; nearly 40 percent of adults have been told they have either high cholesterol or high blood pressure, and more than 10 percent of adults have diabetes. This disparity highlights the need to better understand the connection between food and health.

The good news is that a variety of creative and inspirational efforts are underway across the county to begin to bridge the gap between "having the best healthy food anywhere" and our citizens' growing challenges with debilitating chronic illness. One of the best examples is a partnership involving our local food banks, the WSU Extension, the Olympic Peninsula Healthy Community Coalition and Texas A&M University (yes, you read that correctly!)

These visionary community leaders are bringing federal dollars via a USDA grant into our county to pay local farmers to grow produce which is then distributed to vulnerable populations across the county and paired with appropriate nutritional information and cooking techniques. The goal is to teach people how to use their local bounty, eat a more healthy diet and reduce susceptibility to chronic illness by strengthening connections with local, fresh, healthy food.

I am convinced that one of the keys to helping people understand the link between food and health (We are what we eat!) lies in programs like this that begin to re-establish connections to what food actually is,

and to where it actually comes from. These connections have been lost in the last 50 years as our food system has become increasingly corporate, distant, processed, packaged and industrialized.

A simple example of the power of re-establishing these connections involves successful school nutrition programs. Those that have simply replaced french fries one day with carrot sticks the next have tended to fail...who would want to eat a bland carrot stick when yesterday they were eating a satisfying fry?

Those that have tended to succeed featured carrots that were grown by the students themselves. These students have experienced both the magic of growing a vegetable and the wonder of its amazing flavor when ripe and fresh. This direct connection is the simplest path to behavioral change.

As industrial agriculture and economies of scale work against "local food," partners across Clallam County have come together to promote what amounts to a cultural change in our little corner of the world. We are actively working to create a culture where local food is valued, where the healthy choice is the easy choice and where all county citizens have regular access to locally-grown vegetables and fruit.

You can be a part of this cultural change by participating in the Clallam County Farm Tour. I encourage you to get out, meet your farmers, walk their fields, enjoy some of their bounty and in doing so begin to build, or re-build, your own connection to where YOUR food comes from. Not only will you find yourself eating the most amazing carrots, greens, onions, garlic, berries, apples, milk and meat imaginable, but you will also find yourself feeling better.

Being a part of the solution has never been so delicious, or so much fun!

