

# \$322K grant to boost access to produce

## Low-income families aim of program

By PAUL GOTTLIEB  
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PORTANGELES — A \$322,000 federal grant announced at Monday's Clallam County commissioners meeting will make Peninsula-grown fruits and vegetables more accessible to low-income Clallam County families, officials said.

It also will educate third- and fourth-graders on the importance of healthy eating and could energize the area's agricultural sector with harvesting and job opportunities, project coordinators told commissioners at their work session.

The allocation from the U.S. Department of Agriculture will

fund a two-year National Institute of Food and Agriculture Rural Health and Safety Education Grant that will "improve nutritional health among vulnerable families," project director Joseph Sharkey of Sequim said.

It will target the Port Angeles and Sequim areas the first year and Forks and the West End the second year.

The goal is to fight chronic disease with healthful eating, according to a memo to the board on the program.

"This allows us to work with low-income parents and children to increase their access to health foods, primarily produce," Sharkey said.

The Clallam County project directly links to priority issues that children identified in the county's 2017 Community Health Assessment, Sharkey said.

The effort was spearheaded by Washington State University Extension and the Sequim Food Bank in conjunction with the state Office of Rural Health and the Olympic Peninsula Food Coalition, a consortium of area food banks and individuals in Clallam and Jefferson counties.

Grant writing assistance was provided by graduate students at the Texas A & M Health Science Center, where Sharkey was a professor.

Sharkey told county commissioners that Clea Rome of WSU Extension will focus on the proj-

ect's education component while Andra Smith, director of the Sequim Food Bank, will work with area farmers whose produce will fuel the effort.

Weekly classes coordinated by WSU Extension will be held over eight-week periods for third- and fourth-graders and their parents.

Rome said the class curriculum will include participants "learning the basics about quick and easy, healthy meals, reading nutrition labels, about spending the food dollar further when it comes to purchasing."

Classes will be held in three community settings that will include tribal communities: the Sequim-Jamestown area, Port Angeles-Lower Elwha Klallam communities and the Forks-Neah

Bay areas.

"The idea really is to target the behaviors of parents and their children, regarding children in the third and fourth grade, and bringing them in so they really understand some of produce that's grown here, how to prepare it and what it means," Sharkey said.

The project includes the development of volunteer community advisory boards for the project in each community setting that also would serve as pipelines for additional nutrition initiatives.

The program also will provide opportunities for small-scale farmers, about a dozen of which have been identified as possible participants, and job opportunities for agricultural workers.

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"We're hoping to purchase as much as we can from local-source small and medium-size farms," Smith said. "We're visiting farms now."

Rome said farms now end up donating large quantities of produce to the Port Angeles and Sequim food banks on top of what is purchased, "making it an incredibly affordable option for food banks" to take part

in the program.

Sharkey did not know when the program would start.

"For the next several months, we'll be in kind of a ramp-up stage," he said.

Forks will have the program's full attention in its second year.

"The Food Coalition has recognized for years that folks on the West End have had a much harder time getting fresh produce, whether that's by going to the grocery store or going to

a food bank," Ozias, executive director of the Sequim Food Bank until his election as county commissioner in 2015, said after the meeting.

"It's an undeserved population."

He suggested that under the program, farmers would grow a certain quantity of produce with the expectation of selling it for use in the program.

The goal will be to extend the program after the grant ends, Ozias added.

Program organizers can be expected to aggressively seek out funding to keep the program going and may purchase, for example, refrigerated trailers to transport vegetables and fruit to the West End.

"The trailers aren't going to go away when the grant is completed," Ozias said.

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