Food processors get together with Oregon school districts

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

ODA holds meeting to help bring local food into the schools

While Oregon lawmakers continue to consider the fate of so called farm-to-school legislation this session, others are forging ahead with plans to bring together locally grown and processed foods with kids who receive meals at schools throughout the state. Among those efforts was a one-day meeting at the Food Innovation Center in Portland last week hosted by the Oregon Department of Agriculture. The meeting attracted 24 food processors and representatives of six Oregon school districts responsible for 25 percent of the state's school food budget. Participants generally agree that the meeting was helpful and could lead to more Oregon food products making their way to kids at school."As a result of the meeting, we've had several school districts tell us there will be Oregon products on the menu this coming year that they would not have otherwise offered," says Gary Roth, administrator of ODA's Agricultural Development and Marketing Division. "Getting Oregon products into Oregon schools absolutely fits with the buy local trend we see throughout the state and the country."A wide range of Oregon processors took part in one-on-one discussions with school district food service directors from Portland, Beaverton, Reynolds, Lake Oswego, Tigard-Tualatin, and Seaside. Products sampled and considered ranged from fruits and vegetables to dairy products and baking goods. The ultimate goal is to get healthy, nutritious local food as part of the 47 million school lunches and 22 million school breakfasts served in Oregon each year. The ODA-sponsored meeting got the conversation going and is expected to lead to purchases of at least some of the offerings."The school districts say they are interested in buying more Oregon products but they often don't know who has the types of products they want or need," says ODA's Laura Barton, who organized and facilitated the meeting. "Many of the processors have not looked at selling to schools before. It was good for them to learn more about the possibilities and get acquainted with the schools."ODA and Ecotrust Food and Farms Program co-sponsored a workshop last fall that focused on getting more local food products into schools. Barton also attended the annual conference of the Oregon School Nutrition Association held in March and brought along several food processors. This latest meeting was the logical next step as schools are definitely seeking local products. "Supporting Oregon farmers and producers, and reducing transportation fuel usage will be considered in buying decisions when possible," says Janet Beer of the Tigard-Tualatin School District. "I think it's critical for schools to start exploring ways they can incorporate and use local products," says Susan Barker of the Beaverton School District. "The schools serve the community and the community supports the schools. So buying locally whenever possible just makes good sense."The participating food processors also see a great opportunity in reaching kids via the schools. "We view Oregon schools as a good opportunity for our apple juice, especially with all the pressure to supply kids with healthy drinks when they are at school," says Keith Loran of the Hood River Juice Company. "I also think it is important for schools to buy locally whenever possible. It is a great way for the schools to give back to the state and local economy, which the schools rely upon for funding."Chantal Wright of Norpac is excited about providing processed vegetable components to schools."Taking into consideration the number of school districts in the state and the number of children that are fed daily, it is key that we explore the options to join forces with Oregon schools and be a part of their initiative to provide healthy meals," says Wright. "We are fortunate to have a vast array of local produce, dairies, and bakeries in Oregon that produce top quality products needed by the schools."The two-way exchange of information between processors and school district representatives provided some key first steps in a business relationship that should move local products onto the menu. Food processors learned about what types of foods and recipes worked best for schools. In some cases, there was a creative discussion on how certain food products could be part of new meal solutions that meet dietary requirements while still keeping kids interested in eating lunch at school. "We have an upscale line of vegetables that was of interest and a line of pastas that was a huge hit," says Norpac's Wright. "These products allow schools a shorter prep time and a spectrum of creativity with each item.""The one consistent comment I got from the school district buyers was that our apple cider tastes like an apple and a lot of the juice they buy does not," says Loran of Hood River Juice Company. "They are

very interested because it is an all natural apple cider and, more importantly, they thought the kids would drink it."Other food products of interest on display at the meeting was a muffin using the new "white" whole wheat that offered improved texture, pizza crusts and bread sticks made with whole grain flours, and seven ounce yogurt smoothies, Some companies came away with some ideas on creating new food products that would be better accepted by schools.Taking the two parties through the next steps will be key. ODA will help keep the conversations going."For some, this first meeting was more of a fact gathering experience," says ODA's Barton. "For others, they can now call and have orders placed. There are some long term opportunities we want to keep tracking."Meanwhile, Ecotrust Food and Farms Program continues to partner with school districts across the state to bring Oregon grown foods into the school lunch program. A handful of bills to further the farm-to-school movement continue to be debated at the State Capitol- a concept generally being supported and only in need of funding. Combined, all these efforts are beginning to gather momentum and will result in better foods for school kids and a new market for Oregon producers and processors.

Food processors get together with Oregon school districts by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources