

OUR HEALTH



Community gardens such as this one have become a gathering place and focal point for families and individuals of all ages.

We Are What We Eat

A lack of food security, limited access to nutrition education and fresh, local produce are key factors affecting our community's health.

Mendocino County residents are barraged with advertisements promoting unhealthy food choices. Children, the unwitting victims of intensive marketing, are indoctrinated at an early age to prefer pre-packaged, artificially-sweetened, refined food products over fresh fruits and vegetables. Our institutions are often forced to choose the bottom line over the health of those they serve—the frail elderly, children and hospitalized individuals who are at greatest risk and deserve the highest level of nutrition. One of the overall goals of the Food Action Plan is to bring good food into the mainstream by creating a culture which values and understands what good food is.

Children mimic what they see, which is why there has been a vigorous effort to establish school gardens in

Head Starts and elementary schools throughout the county. The gardens, combined with cooking classes for parents and the daily exposure to the rhythms of gardening begin the process of teaching children about what healthy food is—how it is grown, how it smells and how it tastes. Visitors to the South Ukiah Head Start will notice young children playing in the garden, stopping to munch on a piece of parsley or help their teacher harvest tomatoes. Inside the classroom, a delicious soup is being prepared using a basket of vegetables harvested just minutes before. When young children have access to fresh food, they learn healthy habits that will last a lifetime.

According to the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) 2007, 59% of Mendocino County adults and teens are overweight or obese—a problem which can lead to heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, bone problems, depression, diabetes and some cancers.

The costs of obesity in Mendocino County were approximately \$23.7 million in 2006 due to

direct health care costs, worker's compensation, absenteeism and presenteeism (not being productive at work).²³

Unhealthy Food, Unhealthy Children

A survey conducted by Children Now indicates that 31% of Mendocino County children are overweight. School physical fitness testing found only 25% of 5th graders, 31% of 7th graders, and 39% of 9th graders capable of meeting all tested fitness criteria (aerobic capacity, body composition, abdominal strength, trunk extensor strength, upper body strength, and flexibility). Poverty and food insecurity are often associated with increased obesity, partially because cheaper and more readily available food is often highly processed, of lower quality and less nutritious, containing cheap sugars like high fructose corn syrup and a preponderance of refined flours and preservatives. Among children, 14% reported drinking two or more sodas or other sugary drinks the previous day. Half reported eating fast foods at least once during the previous week.²⁴

Location, Location, Location?

The Community Health Services research project on the Retail Food Environment in Mendocino County found that the ratio of less healthy food establishments (convenience stores and fast food restaurants) to more healthy food establishments (grocery stores and farmers' markets) was more than 2 to 1, indicating that some county residents may have a difficult time accessing healthy foods.

The City of Willits has the dubious distinction of having the county's highest density of fast food restaurants and convenience stores. Residents in these neighborhoods are more likely to be overweight or obese and have higher rates of diabetes.²⁵

In rural Mendocino County, particularly in smaller communities, the predominance of retail establishments offering processed, precooked foods often results in unhealthy diets higher in fats and sugars and lower in fresh fruits and vegetables. Without education and easy access to healthy food alternatives, the most vulnerable among us often have the most difficult time transitioning from a fast-food diet to a healthier regimen.

59% of Mendocino County adults and teens are overweight or obese²⁶

31% of Mendocino County children are overweight

Percent of adolescents age 12–19 years who are obese: 18.4%

Percent of children age 6–11 years who are obese: 18.0%

Percent of children age 2–5 years who are obese: 12.1%

The higher the average daily intake of fruits and vegetables, the lower the chances of developing cardiovascular disease.



The prevalence of fast food establishments in Mendocino County cities provides families with convenience, but at what cost to their long-term health?

Food, Poverty and Underutilized Resources

Those living near and below the poverty line face daily challenges of “food insecurity.” Community kitchens and food banks struggle to meet the needs of a growing hungry population and are burdened with what non-profits call “donor fatigue.”

In 2007, 2 of 5 low-income county residents could not afford enough food, and 63% of adults were considered overweight or obese. Mendocino County is sixth in the state for high rates of food insecurity, with 10% of adults living in food insecure households in 2005, compared to 8.4% across the state.²⁷

With county unemployment at 9.3% as of February 2013 and minimum wage being \$8 per hour, many county residents find themselves unable to adequately feed their families each month. Many of these families look to the CalFresh program to fill that gap.

Enrollment in Mendocino County’s CalFresh Program (formerly the Food Stamp or SNAP-Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) rose by 66%, increasing from 3,100 to 5,927 households from 2008 to 2011. This represents 8,315 individuals and 17% of county households.²⁸

Yet despite the increasing numbers of enrollees, according to the California Department of Social Services, only 60% of Mendocino County residents eligible for CalFresh were participating in the program—meaning approximately 7,650 CalFresh-eligible residents are not enrolled. This level of low participation affects the health and well being of hundreds of families and thousands of children, frail, elderly, and disabled adults. Increasing enrollment by residents who are eligible for CalFresh would have immediate impact on the county’s economy by bringing federal tax dollars to local farms and food related businesses.

Countywide, 68% of students were enrolled in Free and Reduced Price Meal Programs during the 2010–2011 school year, with participation ranging from a low of 33% in the village of Mendocino to 100% participation in Round Valley.²⁹ But again, according to a report prepared by California Food Policy Advocates, 31% of children eligible for Free and Reduced Price Meal programs are not currently enrolled.³⁰

Mendocino County is 6th in the state for high rates of food insecurity, with 10% of adults living in food insecure households

Approximately 7,650 Mendocino County residents eligible for CalFresh are not enrolled



Harvest of the Month pairs school curriculum with the inclusion of fresh, seasonal foods in school nutrition programs.

Are We Prepared?

Just a generation ago, most families prepared for hard times by putting up a few jars of fruit or donating to their church’s emergency food pantry. Depression-era families knew what hunger felt like, but today many people have never known the ravages of hunger. How much food exists in our county, on any given day? Do we have the capacity to feed ourselves during times of crisis?

Informal surveys have been conducted to attempt to gauge our county’s food inventory. Because of limited sales of local produce and the dependence upon trucked-in foods filling county supermarkets, it is estimated that county grocery shelves would be empty in less than a week if deliveries were disrupted due to an emergency or road closures. Though county food banks and other large institutions keep limited inventories of food on hand, there is little doubt that access to food could be challenging in a crisis. It is imperative that citizens and communities address issues relating to emergency food preparedness before an emergency occurs.

Willits residents have taken a bold, creative step forward towards preparing their community for emergencies. Willits Economic Localization worked with North Coast Opportunities to purchase five four-ton grain silos for the storage of rice, grains and beans. Flour is also being milled on site. NCO secured funds from the California Endowment and the Department of Community Services and Development for the project. The Little Lake Grange now operates the program and offers the products for sale while encouraging family preparedness at the same time.

When the five silos are filled, the entire zip code can be fed for approximately one month—an essential

component of community emergency planning and readiness.

What We Can Do

Contributors to this section of the Food Action Plan have outlined several areas of focus to address countywide food and health issues. A multi-pronged educational outreach effort is essential, as well as a commitment to provide economically disadvantaged communities with increased access to fresh, local food. Unlike previous generations, many families do not cook on a regular basis, and when they do, “cooking” might entail popping a frozen entrée into a microwave or opening a box of pasta and artificially colored cheese. When families visit a farmers’ market for the first time, some may notice vegetables they cannot identify and do not know how to prepare. Along with growing food, a healthy local food system must provide parallel education regarding food preparation, storage, preservation and safety.

Further goals include enrolling all eligible applicants in food assistance programs, curtailing marketing of unhealthy foods and supporting individuals and institutions in their transition toward healthier food choices.



Introducing young children to growing, harvesting and preparing their own food provides the foundation for a lifetime of healthy eating.



Ukiah Unified School District food service staff are incorporating innovative techniques to bring fresh, nutritious foods into school cafeterias.

CNAP Takes Action

The County Nutrition Action Plan (CNAP) is an outgrowth of the Food Action Plan, and is already addressing some of the plan's health-related goals. Funding for CNAP is provided by the Network for a Healthy California, which disburses moneys to the Mendocino County Health Department for coordination of CNAP goals and activities.

One of the primary focuses of the CNAP is to improve food access for Mendocino County's low-income citizens through increased enrollment in programs

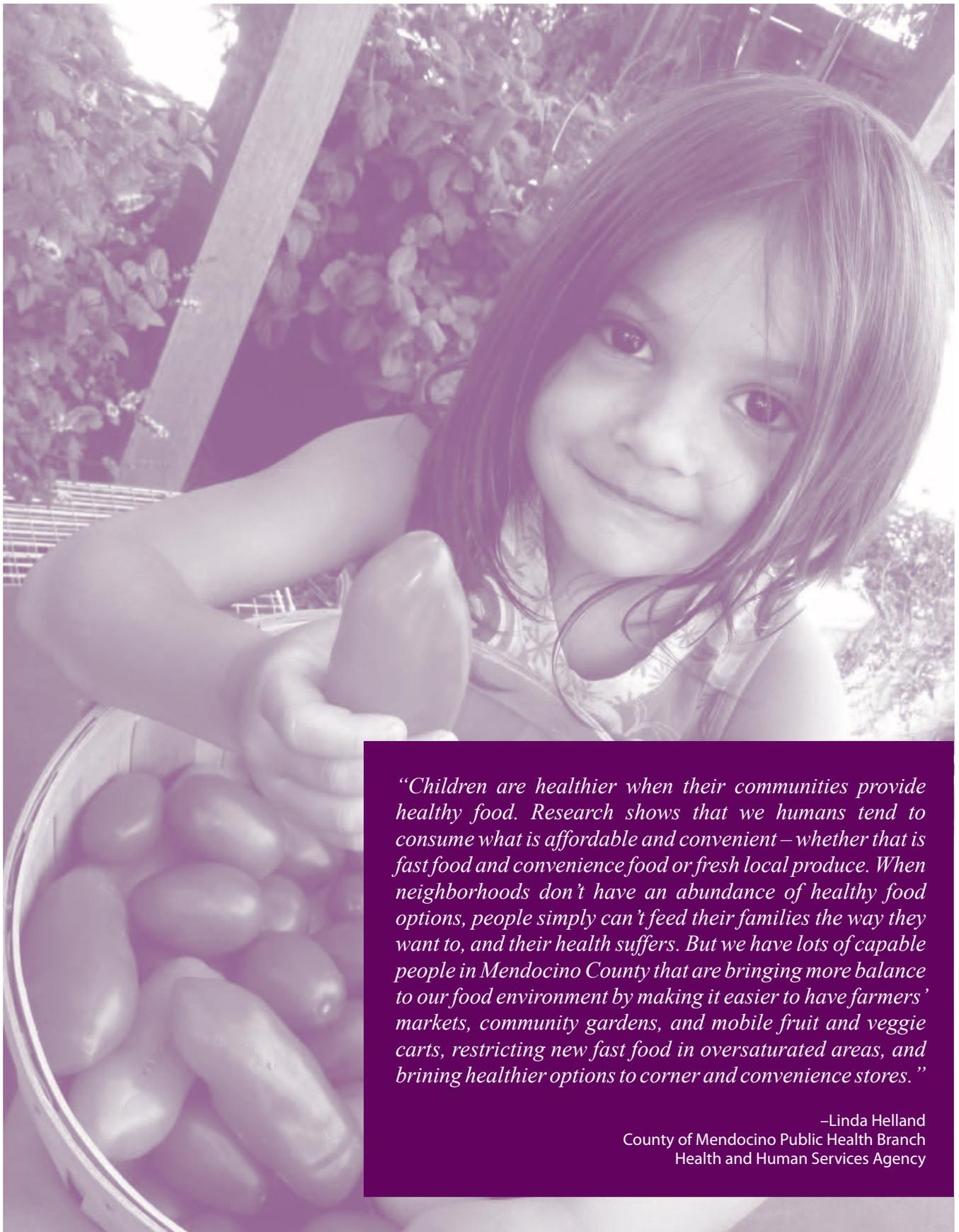


Incorporating locally-raised fruits and vegetables into institutional menus is one way to boost the local food economy.

such as CalFresh, WIC and Free and Reduced Price Meals for students. The CNAP team is working toward increased program coordination so that CalFresh enrollees are informed of other food programs they qualify for. For schools, the group will be working on reducing unhealthy snack choices in school vending machines, continuing the Harvest of the Month program, linking farmers to school cafeterias, promoting school breakfasts and advocating a longer time for eating them.

Other CNAP goals include:

- » Increasing promotion of CalFresh "EBT cards accepted here" at farmers' markets.
- » Providing nutrition education and cooking classes for CalFresh participants and food bank clients.
- » Offering Commodity Supplemental Food Program sign-ups at health clinics.
- » Implementing low-cost purchasing agreements between local farmers and food banks.
- » Connecting senior meal program providers with local farmers.
- » Facilitating countywide communication between food bank directors.
- » Advertising the availability of summer meal programs and expanding meal sites to include family resource centers and low-income housing areas.
- » Providing family day care providers with resources on starting vegetable gardens.



“Children are healthier when their communities provide healthy food. Research shows that we humans tend to consume what is affordable and convenient – whether that is fast food and convenience food or fresh local produce. When neighborhoods don’t have an abundance of healthy food options, people simply can’t feed their families the way they want to, and their health suffers. But we have lots of capable people in Mendocino County that are bringing more balance to our food environment by making it easier to have farmers’ markets, community gardens, and mobile fruit and veggie carts, restricting new fast food in oversaturated areas, and bringing healthier options to corner and convenience stores.”

–Linda Helland
County of Mendocino Public Health Branch
Health and Human Services Agency

CalFresh: Making the Match



Cassie Dillman of NCO's Gardens Project reaches out to the public to enroll all eligible residents in the CalFresh Program.

Recipients of CalFresh (also known as Food Stamps) have an innovative way to stretch their dollars, support local food and improve their health, according to Megan Van Sant, Program Administrator for the Mendocino County Health and Human Services Agency's program, Food For All Mendocino. Food for All is a coalition of groups whose goal is to reduce hunger and increase access to healthy food.

"Every single week we serve a couple of people who come to the market for the first time. Without the match program, a good number of these people wouldn't have anything fresh on their table by the end of the month."

"CalFresh participants access the double-match farmers' market program by swiping their Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards at farmers' market information booths throughout the county," explains Van Sant. Recipients spend \$15 of their CalFresh dollars at farmers' markets each week, but the beauty of the program is that they receive double that amount—\$30 in shopping tokens for their \$15 CalFresh dollars.

The program pairs federal CalFresh "Food Stamp" money with the donation of local dollars, helping realize the goal of encouraging the consumption of fresh, wholesome foods. Van Sant emphasizes CalFresh dollars are 100 percent federal monies— tax dollars that are generated locally and rightfully returned to the community.

"Our goal is to increase earnings for our farmers, introduce new shoppers to the Farmers' Market, increase access to local, healthy food and make sure our tax dollars come back to our local community. It's a triple benefit to farmers, our local economy and to our clients who can now afford healthy food," says Van Sant.

"Everyone who uses the program will attest that it's the coolest program ever," says Scott Cratty, Ukiah Farmers' Market Manager. "This year we scraped together enough funds to have the match program all year."

"Every single week we serve a couple of people who come to the market for the first time," says Cratty. "Without the match program, a good number of these people wouldn't have anything fresh on their table by the end of the month."



The CalFresh/Farmer's Market collaborations have resulted in bringing the benefits of healthy eating to more community members

The 2012 Ukiah CalFresh double match program ran from March through December and drew 272 unique CalFresh customers to the Ukiah market alone. "Once it reached its stride about mid-season, CalFresh use came close to and sometimes exceeded 10% of the total money spent with our local farms and ranches at the market," says Cratty.

"It's a triple benefit to farmers, our local economy and to our clients who can now afford healthy food."

The Ukiah Farmers' Market began accepting EBT cards in 2008. "In 2011 we did our first matching program with \$6,000 from the Community Foundation and the Rodrique Family Fund. Those matching funds lasted 19 weeks. In 2012 we used \$10,952 in matching funds supplied by a combination of sources including The United Way, the Rodrique Family

Fund, NCO Community Action, the Ukiah High School Advanced Placement English Class, Mellow Farm and community donors," Cratty notes.

CalFresh spending was growing slowly before the double-match program, but has exploded since its inception. "Each EBT dollar pulled into the farmers' market puts it in a local pocket where the local multiplier kicks in. It helps build local food production, provides healthier fresher foods for struggling community members and pulls dollars away from the commodity food businesses," Cratty concludes.

EBT Dollars Spent at Ukiah Farmers' Market

2008	\$1,411	
2009	\$1,615	
2010	\$2,802	
2011	\$13,637*	Includes \$6000 matching funds
2012	\$23,733**	Includes \$10,952 matching funds

"Senior Discounts"

Another innovative program pairs Farmers' Market coupons with an additional at-risk population—low-income seniors. The Area Agency of Aging distributes Senior Farmers' Market coupons to a number of local senior agencies each year. The USDA funds the program and provides the coupons, which are distributed by senior centers and sometimes available at Farmers' Markets. The coupons provide eligible seniors with \$20 in coupons that can be redeemed for assorted fruits and vegetables. The coupons are usually distributed in June and can be used until November.

Rainbow Farm: Out of, and Into, the Mouths of Babes

The Redwood's Rainbow Farm at Fort Bragg's Redwood Elementary School is part of a county-wide, coordinated, garden-based nutrition education program. Countless numbers of children have benefitted from this program, which for many students marked their first exposure to a living food system.

Nutritionists, educators and health professionals regularly expound upon the benefits of gardening and incorporation of fresh fruits and vegetables into children's diets. But perhaps children themselves are the most compelling spokespeople.

Kayla and Sunny Anderson attended Redwood Elementary School nearly a decade ago. "Kayla was enrolled in 2003. We had a garden in our backyard, but no fruits or vegetables at that point. Sunny was enrolled a few years later. They were introduced to the Rainbow Farm at that time," explains their mother Karen Anderson. Kayla holds up a tattered paper cookbook with her crayoned rainbow on the cover. "It's almost ten years old," Kayla smiles.

"When we worked in the garden we would help plant or help with the sales. There was a huge wall of raspberries that everyone loved to pick. Our garden coordinator, Julie Castillo taught us about eating healthy and trying to limit junk food," says Kayla.

"We had a mini-farm with rabbits, chickens. Garden time was the highlight of our day," says Sunny. "We'd study a fruit or veggie of the month. I remember eating jicama, broccoli flowers and peppers for the first time. I used to hate peppers. Now I have peppers in my salad every night," Sunny continues.

"As a mom, I've always tried to get the girls to eat fruits and vegetables. It was great to have a



Abilene and Erik Kamstra embody the goals of the Redwood Elementary School's Rainbow Farm, teaching young children the benefits of gardening and healthy eating.



A Rainbow Farm cookbook, over 10 years old, is still precious to former student Kayla Anderson.

teacher reinforce that - encouraging kids to try a squash, try a pea." Every year the Rainbow Farm sells Sugar Snap peas. "Sunny brought some home. To this day, this is one of our traditions. We buy six plants, put them in our garden and eat them all season," says Karen.

"I love going out every day and eating them," says Sunny.

Karen Anderson is a teacher's aide. "I'm shocked so many children only eat junk food -

cookies, white bread and juice boxes - no fruit, no veggies, nothing healthy. I understand it's convenient, but it's such a disservice to our children. They're not able to learn as well. They're not outside playing in their backyards. We're blessed to have Julie, a school garden and exposure to sunlight, fresh air and fresh food. It's great for kids to go home and tell their parents, 'Guess what? I ate carrots from the garden today,'" Karen concludes.

"Some kids have never touched soil, weeded or touched a bug. Initially, a couple students would have nothing to do with the garden. Now they love the garden and they're happy to be here."

Abilene Kamstra is a Redwood Elementary School first grader. Her mother Pam volunteers in the garden. "I've noticed some kids have never touched soil, weeded or touched a bug. Initially, a couple students would have nothing to do with the garden. Now they love the garden and they're happy to be here," Pam notes.

"We're growing zucchini. We're starting cucumbers and we're growing fava beans for our cover crop because Julie reminded us we should do that. That's what we're doing until our cover crop is done," says Abilene.

"We helped harvest the corn last year and we made pancakes from our wheat and our pumpkins. A few days ago we got to try something that looked like an onion but it wasn't. It was a jicama. It tasted really good," Abilene continues.



Kayla Anderson returns to reminisce about the "germinal" experiences she had as a student at the Rainbow Farm.



The Anderson Family began gardening through their exposure to the Rainbow Farm when their children were young, and have continued to plant a garden every year.

"I help mom put the cucumbers in the garden," says Abilene's 4-year-old brother Erik. "I put the wire under the dirt so the gophers don't jump into the garden," he explains.

"I like when Julie teaches kids how easy it is to grow food," says Pam. "They don't understand where their food came from. I think it's every child's right and heritage to know how the soil works and how to grow food. We should know what fresh food tastes like. I can't believe how lucky we are to have this program—to see the joy in children's eyes and watch them learn and have fun," Pam concludes.

"On our next harvest day, I'm going to find some new potatoes. It's like food treasure," says Abilene.

OUR HEALTH: GOALS & ACTIONS

Goal 7: Increase Equitable Access to Healthy, Affordable, Safe, Culturally Appropriate Foods

- 7.1 Support food banks' ability to obtain more locally produced food.
- 7.2 Provide financial assistance so all community members can purchase more local foods from farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture farms, and other local outlets.
- 7.3 Develop ongoing funding stream for incentive programs, including Food Stamp Match, at local food outlets county wide.
- 7.4 Ensure a greater range of multi-cultural foods at food assistance programs.
- 7.5 Develop policies, programs and infrastructure that increase access to healthy food in food insecure communities.
- 7.6 Align local food security activities with larger efforts.
- 7.7 Survey and inventory local emergency food supplies and connect emergency services providers with local food producers.
- 7.8 Increase access to healthy food in all neighborhoods.
- 7.9 Ensure that local, affordable food is available year round for all county residents.

Goal 8: Increase Awareness and Utilization of Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs

- 8.1 Increase enrollment in food and nutrition assistance programs.
- 8.2 Institutionalize the use of Electronic Benefits Transfer Cards (EBT) by retailers, CSAs and farmers' markets.
- 8.3 Develop social marketing campaign to increase awareness of the benefits of food and nutrition assistance programs.

Goal 9: Create Environments that Support Health and Quality of Life

- 9.1 Incorporate data and knowledge of healthy food environments in local food system planning.
- 9.2 Increase awareness of healthy food choices and curtail advertising of unhealthy foods.
- 9.3 Establish and maintain city and county zoning policies to ban or limit fast food outlets.
- 9.4 Ensure access to healthy choices in vending machines.
- 9.5 Implement school, non-profit, private, local government and community wellness policies.

Goal 10: Promote Individual and Community Health by Encouraging Healthy Food Choices

- 10.1 Increase and facilitate community-wide local food, health advocacy and education efforts and events.
- 10.2 Develop/increase cooking classes, demos, and recipes to educate public about nutrition, healthy cooking and utilization of local food.
- 10.3 Incorporate nutrition education in school classrooms and cafeterias.
- 10.4 Design a Healthy Foods promotional campaign. Incorporate social marketing elements.



Michael and Nadine Boer, whose family has been farming in the Ukiah Valley since the 1880s, grow dozens of varieties of heirloom pumpkins and squash, and open their farm to the public and schools every autumn. Over 3,000 children visit the farm and have an opportunity to select their own pumpkins.