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◀Food▶ ◀banks▶ get burned

Those who feed the Valley's hungry brace for shortage due to SoCal fires.

Farin Montañez The Fresno Bee

Every fall, local ◀food▶ ◀banks▶ struggle to meet the needs of low-income families -- but this holiday season will be harder than most, officials say.

The reason: Contributions have been diverted to Southern California fire victims.

Donations to the Madera County ◀Food▶ ◀Bank▶, for example, are down by two-thirds, said Executive Director Dennis Darnell. The bank normally gives out 2.2 million pounds of food a year, helping nearly 500 families a week.

"A lot of people have sent a lot of stuff to [the fire victims] -- and, don't get me wrong, they need it -- but it has left the local people like us running around to find stuff to fulfill our own need," he said.

In the ◀food▶ ◀bank's▶ 10,000-square-foot warehouse on Road 26 in Madera, shelves are emptier than usual. The ◀food▶ ◀bank▶ holds only about 25% of the food it normally does at this time of year, Darnell said.

"And what's not empty yet will be empty soon," he said.

The Community ◀Food▶ ◀Bank▶ in Fresno organized drives to help ◀food▶ ◀banks▶ in Southern California, and it is struggling because those drives took the focus off the local need, said President and CEO Dana Wilkie.

The ◀food▶ ◀bank▶ delivered 45,000 pounds of food and household goods to Southern California raised during two drives to help evacuees who had taken shelter in Qualcomm Stadium in San Diego, Wilkie said.

Community ◀Food▶ ◀Bank▶ feeds 50,000 people a week, giving out 7 million pounds of food each year in Kings, Madera and Fresno counties.

During last year's crop freeze, which caused many agricultural workers to lose their jobs, the Central Valley received food from ◀food▶ ◀banks▶ in Los Angeles and San Diego. Community ◀Food▶ ◀Bank▶ is happy to return the favor, Wilkie said, despite urgent needs at home.

"Our county has one of the highest rates of poverty, especially children in poverty," said Reyes Zaragoza, executive director of the Visalia Emergency Aid Council, which serves 14,000 families each year. "So we're just trying to keep up with our problem here."

Many ◀food▶ ◀banks▶ struggle every year to acquire enough turkeys to complete holiday meals, Zaragoza said.

"We were stressed last year because we came pretty close to not getting all those turkeys," he said. "I laid awake at night thinking, how am I going to help this many families when we only have 10 turkeys a few days away from Thanksgiving?"

Last year, turkey donations were scant in most food distribution facilities. The Fresno Rescue Mission had only 10 turkeys in its walk-in freezer one week before the holiday, while Bread of Life ministry had none.

◀Food▶ ◀bank▶ officials say the holiday need has increased for four reasons:

Farmworkers seek help after being laid off from seasonal jobs. "It really comes down to making a choice between paying the rent and the utilities or buying food," Zaragoza said.

Buying holiday gifts strains family budgets, causing more families to ask for aid. "A lot of people come in on Thanksgiving and Christmas that we'll never see the rest of the year," Darnell said.

There is a marked effort to provide special meals to families with children on the holidays for memory's sake. "We make a special effort because we believe that all children should have good memories of the holidays," Zaragoza said. "We don't want them to remember not having anything to eat on Christmas morning."

California ◀food▶ ◀banks▶ are receiving about 40% less in food from the U.S. Department of Agriculture than in past years -- meaning about 31 million fewer meals available for needy families this year, said Kim McCoy Wade, executive director of the California Association of ◀Food▶ ◀Banks▶.

The USDA, which normally buys food to support the agricultural market, is purchasing less food because prices are higher than in the past. Thus, the USDA has less food to distribute to ◀food▶ ◀banks▶ nationwide, McCoy Wade said.

Residents who rely on ◀food▶ ◀banks▶ to put meals on the table will feel the effects during the holidays unless the community comes through with enough donations, officials say.

Most ◀food▶ ◀banks▶ see spikes in donations around this time of year because of increased hunger awareness and generosity during the holidays. And the end of the year marks the deadline to write off donations for tax purposes, McCoy Wade said.

She hopes the Southern California fires also will motivate people to donate locally.

"Terrible situations are met with an outpouring of generosity," McCoy Wade said. "I just hope people help fill the need not only in San Diego, but also in their own community."