

Setting a FEAST

Spring workshops assess local food system and plan for improvement

By [Sarah Lemon](#)

Mail Tribune

February 29, 2012 2:00 AM

A token meal of locally produced foods will whet appetites for information and conversation at a series of free workshops kicking off in March.

Community FEASTs are planned throughout the spring to gather information on the Rogue Valley's food system and to devise plans for its improvement. About 1,000 people have attended such events in about half of Oregon's counties since 2009 under a model developed by the Oregon Food Bank, says Sharon Thornberry, community food-systems manager for the organization.

"What we have to do is move people from assessment to action," she says.

FEAST (Food, Education, Agriculture Solutions Together) isn't just another format for generating reports that sit on a shelf, says Thornberry. Lebanon's school district started purchasing from local farmers a week after that community's FEAST. Grant County hosted its first farmers market within a couple of months. Although the products of Oregon agriculture benefit from a global food system, says Thornberry, people in farming communities often see no benefit.

"We need a balance," she says. "It's fresher and better if we can get it locally, and it supports our local economy."

While spearheaded by the state's food banks, FEAST isn't merely an effort to provide more nutrition assistance to the poor. If regional food resources actually served communities, many residents wouldn't have to rely on food banks, says Hannah Ancel, community food-systems coordinator for ACCESS Inc., Jackson County's emergency food bank.

A \$50,000 grant from Meyer Memorial Trust will bring FEASTs to five Rogue Valley communities and funds Ancel's work with ACCESS. Smaller "Community Conversations" with potluck meals will take place throughout the spring. The events are co-sponsored by the Josephine County Food Bank and THRIVE, a nonprofit economic-development and food-advocacy group.

The several-hours workshop starts with a presentation from local experts, followed by brainstorming about how the area's food system should function. Participants then divide into small groups based on common interests to draw up action plans. A dozen people attended the

state's smallest FEAST, says Thornberry, while the largest in Forest Grove hosted more than 100.

Organizers are hoping to "push the boundaries" in the Rogue Valley, which has seen rapid growth in small farming, specialty manufacturing, community gardening and other efforts around local food. Part of the FEAST process, says Ancel, is prioritizing.

"There's so much going on, and there are so many resources, but they're almost happening independently."

In Lebanon, school officials realized they could donate cafeteria surplus, including locally grown foods, to the community's soup kitchen, which expanded its hours for free meals and improved their quality, says Thornberry. In Albany, a physician is working to distribute vouchers to farmers markets as "prescriptions," she adds.

"It had a multiplier effect."

FEASTs are planned for March 11 in Applegate, April 14 in the Phoenix-Talent area, April 26 in Grants Pass, April 28 in Eagle Point and May 12 in Ashland; times and locations to be announced.

The first Community Conversation is slated for March 13 in Jacksonville; time and location to be announced. Dates are yet to be determined for Conversations in Shady Cove, east and west Medford and Rogue River.

Reach Food Editor Sarah Lemon at 541-776-4487 or email slemon@mailtribune.com.

If you go

What: Community FEAST, a free workshop to evaluate and improve the local food system; a meal of soups and bread is included.

When: 1 to 6 p.m. Sunday, March 11

Where: Applegate River Ranch House, 15100 Highway 238, Applegate

For more information: Call Hannah Ancel at 541-618-4019 or email hancel@accesshelps.org; see www.oregonfoodbank.org/FEAST.