

# Hunger in Ag County is a tragedy

Juan Esparza Loera

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Last December, I wrote a column about food insecurity -- the bureaucratic words for hunger -- in Fresno and Tulare counties. The problem of hunger in the nation's most agriculturally rich area is ironic.

In April, Feed The Children, an Oklahoma-based Christian organization, began sending food to Tulare County. For Tulare, which briefly held bragging rights as the nation's top-producing agriculture county, starting to receive out-of-state food is tragic. "We grow so much food, and yet the access and availability of that fresh produce is minimal," says Edie Jessup of the Fresno-based Community Hunger & Nutrition Forum. "We have so much hunger and poverty."

*The impact of hunger in the area is not new to advocates such as Jessup. Studies show that 40% of adults in the area find it difficult to put food on the table. Poverty, unemployment, high teen pregnancy rates and low education levels contribute to the problem.*

*Some folks familiar with the situation have started to call the Central Valley "the Appalachia of the West."*

Thanks to Feed The Children, images of hungry children and near-homeless families will appear on television screens, part of the nonprofit organization's plea for donations to help feed the world's neediest. The group plans to send a film crew to the area next month to put a face on hunger.

That's right; children from the land of vast orchards and fields will appear in the same television commercials as kids from Third World countries. It's the kind of publicity that we could do without, but reality in the Valley isn't limited to championship sports teams and dancing raisins.

The sight of an impoverished child who can be helped by small donations from viewers has worked for Feed The Children. The organization, which shipped 63 million pounds of food and 24 million pounds of other essentials worldwide last year, is the nation's 28th largest charity.

Providing food is not the most effective solution. Jobs, which are becoming as scarce in the Valley as clean air, are the answer.

"The government started doling out dollars and lost sight of the bigger mission," says state Sen. Richard Alarcon, who visited the area last month as chairman of the Ending Poverty in California committee.

"We forgot to teach people how to fish. Instead, we gave them a fish."

There is only so much government can do, especially in lean years.

"Our difficulty is that we have scarce resources," Fresno County Supervisor Juan Arambula testified at Alarcon's committee hearing. "What we have gets used up by dealing with the effects of poverty."

Until someone waves a magic wand to create more good-paying jobs in the area, providing the fish is the best way to combat local hunger.

There are ways you can help:

Contact Food Link of Tulare County, which provides food for more than 92,000 people, at (559) 651-FOOD.

The Fresno-based Community Hunger & Nutrition Forum will hold its monthly meeting from noon to 1:30 p.m. Wednesday at Trinity Lutheran Church, 3973 N. Cedar Ave. The group, which works with local food pantries and agencies, is conducting a community food assessment. Call (559) 485-1416 for details.

Donations to Feed The Children can be mailed to: Feed The Children, P.O. Box 36, Oklahoma City, OK 73101.

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