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Excerpts and Summary of the 47th Community Hunger and Nutrition Forum

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Focus: *How can we create an Interdependent Local System that helps produce sustainable agriculture, access to nutritious food for all, and sustainable good jobs?*

The following is a summary of the reports made at the forum compiled by Edie Jessup and Carey Berend.

Edie Jessup, Fresno Metro Ministry: Good afternoon. Welcome to the 47th Hunger and Nutrition Forum presented by Fresno Metro Ministry. Today our Forum's distinguished panel will address: **How can we create an interdependent local food system that helps produce sustainable agriculture, sustainable nutritious food access for all, and sustainable jobs?**

We know that food insecurity in Tulare and Fresno Counties is close to 40% of the adults. With that, I would like very much to ask Melissa Daigle, USDA Western Region Food and Nutrition Services to introduce the US Congressional Hunger Center Fellows and tell us about the project that three local agencies and the USDA are sponsoring, and Melissa will introduce the fellows. Following this forum we will have a Press Conference and both Dennis Barrett and Laura Tatum will talk a little more then. I encourage you to meet them.

Melissa Daigle, USDA-Food and Nutrition Services, Western Region: Thank you, Edie. Dennis Stewart (USDA –Director, Food Stamps, Western Region) and I are very proud to be here today to introduce these folks to you. The **Congressional Hunger Center is a bipartisan organization funded by Congress whose task is to train leaders to end hunger in the United States, and they deploy these future hunger leaders to communities across the United States.** Twenty of the fellows are assigned per year, so we competed with a lot of different organizations across the states and we're one of the very few that won them; we're very pleased to have been chosen for this project. **The Hunger Fellows are going to be working on both improving ways that people access the Food Stamp Program, hopefully increasing the number of people who are able to access the benefits to which they're eligible. That might take the form of working with nontraditional partners in the community, increasing the amount of Food Stamp outreach, and finding new ways to deliver the Food Stamp Program. They are also going to be working on emergency food issues: they will be looking at where the community needs new food pantries and how those food pantries can help deliver that food stamps message as well. Laura Tatum and Dennis Barrett.** They're very newly out of college and very new to the area, having only been here a few days. I'll let them tell you a little bit about themselves.

Laura Tatum, US Congressional Hunger Center Fellow: I'm originally from the Bay Area and I went to college all the way across the country in Maine at Bowdoin College where I studied Sociology and Spanish. Studying Spanish led me to study abroad in La Paz, Bolivia. I spent a year there

improving my Spanish and doing some community work. I've been involved in community work all throughout high school and college and I'm really excited to be doing similar kinds of work in a new area. Working at this full time for the first time is really exciting. It puts some of my education to practice. We're very excited to be here and learn a lot from all of you over the next five months. Thank you.

Dennis Barrett, US Congressional Hunger Center Fellow: I'm from New Jersey. The farthest west I've ever been before last week was Texas, so this is very new to me out here, and I like it a lot so far. I grew up in a tiny town right by the ocean so I'm still looking around here, but I've yet to find the Pacific. I just graduated from Notre Dame in May with a degree in History and Political Science. I studied abroad in Ireland where I actually took some interesting classes on the history of hunger there. I've interned in D.C. with both Human Rights Watch and the Children's Defense Fund so I've had some great exposure to the nonprofits back there. I'm looking forward to working with all you folks here. It's a pleasure to be here.

Edie Jessup: I thank the Hunger Fellows for being here. I hope that they meet every one of you in the room and have an opportunity to discuss with you the issues that we are going to start discussing today at the Forum. I want to call your attention to this wonderful poster, "**Fresno, the Power, the Passion, the Produce.**" That really is the framework for our discussion today because we have the interesting conundrum of under-employment, in fact, unemployment, that is huge, three times that of the nation. **The problem is embedded in the kind of agricultural work and business that we have in the Valley, and yet our agriculture is our best resource. We will be looking at how we might increase access to food by low-income people so they have enough to eat to be healthy and strong, ready to work and ready to learn, and at the same time we can't forget that our agriculture is in peril in many ways and yet we are producing food for the whole country. How can we bring back some of what is our richest resource-Food- to our population?** It really is interesting.

So this panel today is going to be talking about: **How we can create that interdependent local food system that helps produce sustainable agriculture, sustainable nutritious food access for all, and sustainable jobs?** We're going to give each panelist two minutes to talk on the topic from his or her perspective. We have folks here from agriculture and business, we have folks who are farmers, we have folks who are working on job development issues. Each panelist has a piece of the puzzle.

I'm just going to call your attention to today's paper, the Fresno Bee. In the Life section we had this beautiful photograph of the lovely produce that we raise here and talking about "*It looks like Muscat Love.*" I love it. It is a story about the wonderful produce that we grow here. On the front of the Business section, we find that "Joblessness plagues Fresno" and that we are the eighth worst employment area nationally. I really hope that you will read this. We also see on the Business page that "*Another Vons in Fresno has closed*". That's two Ralph's stores and two Vons at least, and down at the bottom of the page we see, too, "*The Walnut Industry Cracks Strategy for Growth.*" **The resources that we have are our food and our agriculture, and at the same time that plays into the difficult problems we have in people getting enough food.** So, with that as a start, I'm going to turn this over to Dennis Stewart. He will be our moderator

Dennis Stewart, USDA Western Region Director of Food Stamps: As you listen to these folks make their presentations I'd like you to try to see what the connection is with the work that you specifically do. **I'm sure that everybody here serves a common interest, which is making sure that needy folks in Fresno and the surrounding counties have enough to eat. It's the importance for economic growth, for education of kids in the schools to have enough to eat before they go to school. It's the backbone of survival for people who are in low-income jobs to be able to get food assistance programs like Food Stamp Program, which we support.**

Food Stamps is an entitlement program, which means that anybody who qualifies can get it. But we have a lot of barriers because we have only about 50% of the eligibles in the

State of California who are actually receiving food stamps. So, what I'd like you to do is to see as you're listening *how we can break down some of those barriers and how can we at the same time encourage and support agriculture, which is the basis of this community. So, process the different perspectives you're going to hear from this panel. Let's hope that's the step to some solutions for improving some of the issues that Edie was mentioning.*

Our first panelist, Toulou Thao, is with Fresno Housing and Urban Development. Could you tell us a little bit about your organization?

Toulou Thao, HUD: Again, my name is Toulou Thao. I'm with HUD in Fresno. **To be very brief about this, this is not rocket science. I'd like you to think about drawing a road map from the field to the dinner table of our consumers. In Fresno, for example, we have a lot of produce, yet a lot of people still go hungry. Why?** I believe that if we do design a road map where we can use the produce and pass it out to the right people, I think we can do a lot of good there. In this area, for example, **70% of our Southeast Asians are farmers. Many of their crops are tossed in the field because they're not good enough to be marketed through the regular channel. I believe that we still lack resources, collaboration, and connection.** I think that if the community comes together we can certainly design a system of flow where these products will go and how you channel it where the family can benefit too, open up more marketing resources, etc. Produce that is not good enough to be used can be channeled elsewhere. At the same time, USDA has this (commodity) program. **We can look into possibly creating some upgrades, a packaging thing where we can package it and send it directly to Costco and others.** That would create jobs that pay higher than minimum wage. This is what we see. At this point, I do believe that we have a lot of resources but we have yet to connect to each of us. I believe that with all of you in this room and a lot of people outside, too, if we come and sit down together and think about it we can certainly create something that would be very creative, very beneficial economically and socially to our people here. That's all I have to say. Thank you.

Dennis Stewart: Thank you. Our next presenter is Keith Kelley from Fresno West Coalition for Economic Development.

Keith Kelley, Fresno West Coalition for Economic Development: We sit in West Fresno west of Highway 99, and have a devious distinction of having the **poorest census tract in Fresno County.** We deal in a lot of different issues. Our main thing is economic development, **business development** – we have classes on business plans on line. We also deal with **credit union issues or access to financial services.** We're working on that process and on **affordable housing** and a little bit of market rate but mainly affordable housing. Our core board members were the ones that worked on the **Kearney Palm Shopping center.** They were the ones that had tenacity. They fought constantly for about three or four years with City Council and the powers that be, and **finally they got a shopping center for better access to foods and produce and such. I'm also a very strong supporter of the mayor's Fitness Council and also of nutrition.** We know there is a lot of farming here. Our organization is actually looking into some of the **employment opportunities that are in farming** and how we can expand that. **We also are concerned about nutrition. We know that one of the biggest challenges to nutrition is poverty. We know that's the number one challenge and so we want to make sure that we're part of the whole process.**

Dennis Stewart: Thank you, Keith. Our next presenter is Tom Willey, Specialty Crops Farming.

Tom Willey, T&D Willey Farms: I believe our valley has been undergoing an experiment for about the last 100 years in extensive agriculture where we have monopolized most of the natural and social capital of the valley to create basically what we call now the agribusiness specialized agriculture system. **We are the most wealthy, productive piece of agriculture region on the face of the earth.** This valley produces greater wealth in agriculture every year than all of the gold that was ever dug out of the Sierra Nevada's since the days of the 49ers. **But what**

has this great wealth accomplished for us? We have communities with the highest rates of poverty, the highest rates of malnutrition and hunger amidst this wealth. We also have farmers who are producing vast quantities of commodity products for the world market that are going broke on a daily basis and on a cyclical basis. This system is under grave challenge now from a lot of fronts – from the economic front, from farm failures, from the environmental front. We're now told that we can't use all the water out of the San Joaquin River to do this.

I think we need to look at whether this experiment in extensive agriculture needs not to be turned into an experiment in intensive agriculture. T&D Willey Farms has been working for the last 20 years to become an example of an intensive farming on a small scale. Our farm is 75 acres in size. We employ 50 persons full time year round on that 75 acres. In our seasonal peak, we employ 100 persons on that 75 acres. *We are producing three times per acre with nontoxic organic means, three times per acre gross sales, what would be considered a good growth sales for intensive fruit growing in the region.* We are providing nontoxic organic produce to the local community now. **We're trying to get more buy-in from our local community. I think our agriculture needs to make more of a connection to feeding our own communities well and to employing the people in agriculture year round, full time, and to creating better incomes for farmers. We might be able to do that with a lot less resources than we have been utilizing in the last 100 years for the type of agriculture that we now have.**

Dennis Stewart: Great. Thank you, Mr. Willey. Vernon Crowder will represent the business community.

Vernon Crowder, Business Community: I describe myself in terms of my previous role, namely being an agriculture economist. That has given me a lot of training in some fundamentals of business and economics, and having an **understanding of why supply shall always equal demand, why prices are the primary means of discrimination, and that there always needs to be some form of discrimination in terms of allocating resources.** So, I bring this training to the table today, and I think that's why I was invited by Edie to join. **I call myself the token business or Republican in the Unitarian Universalist Church; and I have a tendency to look at things systematically, look at it in the whole, and look at what the root issues are.** Today I really hope to listen quite a bit and then to maybe respond to questions, respond to other suggestions. **I really think our agenda includes a multiple of issues that aren't necessarily related.**

I would make the observation. **Most of the learned economists in the world and the people that study world hunger have learned that it's not a function of the price of food or the accessibility to food. It's a matter of income problems and the inability of certain populations, and sometimes countries, sometimes regions, but especially certain populations, to make a sufficient income to gain access or to afford that food. I think that's even related to our area.**

I'd make the observation that many of our **problems here in the valley are very similar to other major agricultural areas in the United States, for example, the Mississippi Delta. We had a large agricultural economy develop here that because of a number of reasons to be competitive moved toward mechanization. We not only saw it because of immigration policy, because of the incentive to mechanize, that we saw many, many families migrate here because of problems in their own country and inability to find jobs. We basically have imported a very young unskilled labor force and then there are just not enough jobs here to sustain them.** This is a fallout of the agricultural influence here in the valley and it's been witnessed in other places. I think those are some of the challenges that we need to address. *If you look at whom the core unemployed are in this valley it's young, unskilled Latino males. That is a direct function of the agricultural influence and a number of government policies including – Tom referred to it – what's the incentive in agriculture and how they can try to be profitable; also, what our income transfer policies are and our immigration policy as well.*

Dennis Stewart: Tim Reese, from the Community Food Bank.

Tim Reese, Executive Director, Community Food Bank: We absolutely can as a community sustain agriculture and have income for farmers, we absolutely can improve and sustain access to nutritious food in our community for everyone, and without question we can develop jobs around this issue. All three of these issues posed are do-able. They're do-able within my lifetime. Here is the challenge for the community: We have to be a little more creative. We need to get the workforce development people with job initiatives together with economic development council and those who are concerned about bringing industry to our community and sustaining industry in our community. We need to get the Farm Bureau and the farmers to the table, and we need a few investors who will seed some money. America has a problem that is, I think, probably exacerbated here in our community and that is the **problem of hunger and access to food**. Because of change in the food industry worldwide, and we're feeling those changes here in the Valley, more and more Americans are going hungry. **America's Second Harvest estimates that it needs an additional 250 million pounds of food annually to just keep up with the current level of food access across the country. Where does the food come from? It's grown right here in our backyard. The irony is we till under and allow to rot significant tonnage, millions of tons of food annually. What needs to be developed in our community is a regional community food bank that can acquire that food from farmers who produce it here, warehouse and redistribute that food not just locally in our community but across the state and across the United States. That is the vision America's Second Harvest has for us, and the question is: what is the vision that we have for ourselves? Thank you.**

Dennis Stewart: Thank you, Tim. Our next presenter is Billie Richardson from Fresno Unified School District Food Services.

Billie Richardson, Food Services Director, Fresno Unified School District: Welcome and thank you for having me today. I am the Food Service Director for Fresno Unified. **Last year we served 14.5 million meals to the students of Fresno Unified. In doing that, 88% of those that participated in the meal program were for free and reduced meals.** It means we have a problem of poverty in our area, as we've all stated. We offer meals under the (USDA) National School Lunch Program, Breakfast Program, and After School Snacks for the adult and childcare programs, as well as the Summer Food Program. So, **meals are available almost year round for any child that wants to have a meal.**

We have found in the district that we could probably serve an additional seven million meals a year if we could get students to come in for breakfast. All of our schools except seven serve breakfast and we have a very low participation there. We've tried many different things to encourage more students to eat. We offer fresh fruit or vegetables every day on our menu and we buy from two produce companies in town. We buy from the Department of Defense part of our commodity allocation for fruits and vegetables. There is hunger out there. Our department would be willing to work with any other organization that could offer suggestions or help in providing additional food to the children.

Dennis Stewart: Thank you. Our next presenter is Michael Yang from UC Cooperative Extension.

Michael Yang UC Cooperative Extension: Hello. I think the Valley is still the number one in agriculture. **We have a lot of farmers in this area, the Southeast Asian, include many groups, we have Hispanics, the African Americans, everybody grows food in this area. We have all the foods here, but a lot of our products have to go to a broker and then someone else. If there is a way that you can get food directly from the farmer, get fresh from the farm, we have the products available here. We have farmers you can talk to directly. A lot of the time our farmers go to markets over on the coast (like Los Angeles or San Francisco). That takes a lot of time and is very risky, and our farmers are in danger because the travel is a long distance.**

If there is a way that we can distribute to the community like if there is community-supported agriculture and you can just go directly to the farmer. I brought a farmer with me

today. **He grows, like he said, good strawberries and a lot of other vegetables.** I know Tom Willey from Willey Farms. For the last ten years, he grows organic and so you can just go **directly to farmers instead of go to markets.** So, I'm here to say that we have all the products available. **We just need a way to get from the farmers (to the consumers).**

Dennis Stewart: Thank you. Our next presenter is Blong Lee, EOC Refugee Programs.

Blong Lee, EOC Refugee Programs: Good afternoon. My name is Blong Lee with **Fresno County EOC.** We run the **Refugee Micro enterprise Development Program.** It's a successful program that has been there since 1993. We have a **revolving loan that was funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, Bank of America, and Fresno County.** We've lent over **\$1 million in the past decade to small refugee type farmers.** The average acre size is about eight. The average loan size is about **\$8,000 to \$10,000.** *These are small micro projects, but these enable our refugees to be in business for themselves, to be self-employed and to be self-sufficient.* Many of our farmers have bought homes, they have been able to get off the welfare role, have been able to put their kids through college.

I'm here mainly to talk about the **sustainable jobs issue** and this to me is what it is. We **have to be able to provide these types of resources to individuals who want to go into business,** who want to go into farming. They want to go into providing for their families, want to have the self-esteem and the respect from their children who have grown up in this country. Children who have grown up American and who didn't look to them in the beginning because they're saying, "Hey, you know, my parents are on welfare." Now they're beginning to respect their parents saying, "You're business individuals, you're doing something for the family, you're feeding the family." Those are some of the things that we want to see happen. We want to make sure that resources get to these families.

The other thing is that I challenge Fresno Unified and the local colleges and universities and prisons and casinos to buy from the local producers. I don't know if that's happening but that's something that we would like to see happen. Thank you.

Dennis Stewart: Thank you. Our next presenter is Jeanette Sutherlin from UC Cooperative Extension.

Jeanette Sutherlin, UC Cooperative Extension: Thank you. What I'd like to address with you today are comments from a recent **Latino Public Forum** that was held here in Fresno serving all of the Central Valley. UC Cooperative Extension hosted that as a part of our Latino Five-A-Day Program, a campaign that comes out of our office. What came from that forum was a **discussion regarding access to fruits and vegetables particularly in rural communities, particularly for the Latino populations.** There are **four barriers that were identified,** and a few of the solutions that that group came up with. If you'd like a complete list of the solutions if you'll just give me your name afterwards if you have an e-mail I'll send that out to you. **One of those barriers was education via media** and some of the points were that we really need to listen to our audience and that's particularly true in our Latino population. Meet the audience where they are and have a real focus on families and their needs. The media needs to really educate and we need to deliver in a medium that is well accepted. Kids' cartoons on Saturday mornings was one example and if any of you happen to watch kids' cartoons in the morning you can count on one hand the number of times they suggest to children that they eat fruits and vegetables, maybe less than one hand. **A second barrier was a negative attitude and perception regarding fruits and vegetables.** There is an attitude about wealth, and that's that **eating vegetables equates to being poor and having meat equates to being wealthy** and so there is an attitude regarding fruits and vegetables. What we need to do is encourage our children by having fruits and vegetables at every meal. **We need to recognize that in many families the adult male makes the decisions for the family; and we need to help the adult male understand the need for fruits and vegetables in the diet.** We need to help kids understand that fruits and vegetables are power foods. **Another barrier is cultural food procurement, skills and**

information, and making health connections. Extremely important, we found in our many years of working with populations coming to this country, **is Western ways are not necessarily the best. We want to acculturate populations when that is not necessarily the best thing to do in terms of their choices of foods.** Finally, the **barriers of socioeconomic factors, education, lack of cooking skills, it's a huge barrier that we see today, and then customs.** The most important point that I want to share with you that came out of that is **teaching compassion to people who work with low-income families as we provide educational opportunities for them.** Thank you.

Dennis Stewart: Thank you, Jeanette. Walt Parry from the Fresno Metro Ministry.

Rev. Walt Parry, Executive Director, Fresno Metro Ministry: We have children, families, and individuals without the money to get nutritious food that they need and the children's cognitive abilities and relationships are diminished. We have children, families, and individuals with funds who do not purchase or do not eat nutritious fruits and vegetables. We have children who will not eat the nutritious foods of their cultural families and instead want to be more American and eat fast foods.

We have schools, nonprofits, childcare centers, congregations and others that have money to buy food for meals but often do not have the mechanism for buying and preparing fresh fruits and vegetables. *We are the food basket of the world and should be able to fully utilize the fresh vegetables and fruits grown here but too often, we do not.* We must find a way to get fresh, nutritious food to those in financial and nutritional need, stimulate the local economy, reward the farmers, and possibly produce additional jobs. I will later be mentioning some possible ways to achieve this goal. *I do recommend, however, that we create a Task Group of farmers, consumers, advocates, job developers, nutritionists, healthcare workers, government, marketing specialists, farm workers, foundations, and other interested parties to create a plan and to create the plan within three to six months.* The primary goal is getting nutritious local fresh food to those in need.

Dennis Stewart: Thank you, Walt.

Edie Jessup: Thank you all very much for presenting an overview of the pieces of this puzzle. Do you have some other remarks after listening to other people?

Vernon Crowder: I want to bring up this whole issue of Second Harvest. There seems to be this illusion that there is a great amount of food going to waste and I certainly know a lot of my clients on occasion are letting food drop to the ground and are sometimes disking it under. The reason they're doing that is because the market prices are so low at the time because of the abundance on the market that they can't even get enough price to cover the variable costs of picking it and packing it let alone shipping it. So, you have a situation where this only happens when the market prices are exceedingly low and you just can't cover the cost of moving it. These are pretty efficient operators and these markets are pretty efficient at actually moving product around and packing it and so forth. **I find myself puzzled by how we think we're going to supplement people's income or do a better job of moving product, packing it, taking it and moving it efficiently better than what the market has proven it can already do when there is actually so much product available that the price is too low anyhow.**

Dennis Stewart: I wonder if Tim might respond to that.

Tim Reese: I agree. **It is not an issue of not enough food. There is more than enough food.** We all know that. **It is an economic issue; it's having the resources to acquire and distribute the food and that's where it requires social and political will. It's not that expensive to acquire the food from the farmer.** If we had two cents a pound, we could buy food from the farmers. At two cents a pound, they would be willing to sell it because it could cover at least their harvesting costs. **It**

doesn't take much in terms of money, but I think it does take creative and new ways of looking at the problem to acquire the food and distribute the food because where money is made in the industry is who processes the food makes the money and that's the challenge we have locally in our community.

It's ironic that fresh produce leaves the Valley through America's Second Harvest network of food banks and goes to other parts of the state while people in our own community continue to go hungry. That does not make sense to me at all and it's because we don't have the infrastructure in the local community food bank to acquire and distribute the food. It's a complex issue but one that can be solved if we decide it's something we want to handle.

Tom Willey, Farmer: We donate food every week to probably four or five different community feeding programs in Fresno and Madera area and without regard to what the commodity price is. **Just the grading and the quality standards require you to cull out a great deal of very good and nutritious food. In fact, we actually throw away our best tomatoes every day because they're too ripe to ship to market but they're the best tomatoes to eat and we all eat out of the cull box because they're the best. So those are the things we donate to the market. The biggest difficulty that we have in dealing with food distribution programs is they're not as efficient or as well organized as the market system is. They have to be there exactly on time, they have to have the right kind of equipment, they have to have the ability to refrigerate the product where it's going, they have to have the ability to return our carton or our crate to us, which sometimes is more valuable than what's in it. We can afford to give away the product but we can't afford to give away the box. So, it's organization and efficiency issues that are probably a serious detriment to farms cooperating with these programs; but we work hard at it.**

Tim Reese, Community Food Bank: I absolutely agree with you. Here's part of the challenge, speaking on behalf of the food banking industry. **We are the authorized distributor of federal commodities through the EFAP program that service hundreds of thousands of people in our community. The irony is we get this free food from the federal government but the reimbursement on the cost incurred to distribute the food for the federal government is forty cents on the dollar. Every pound of free food from the federal government we distribute costs us money out of our pockets.** The only way we can sustain it is through fundraising. Well, it's a little odd that **we have to beg, plead, do car washes, and bake sales to raise the money to sustain the federal distribution of commodities in our community.** Food banks across the country are so stressed that many of them are on the verge of closing because they don't have the resources to operate. I agree. We have five trucks that I would dump tomorrow if we had replacement of decent vehicles so we could pick up the food. We have ordered a new cooler and freezer so we can multiply the amount of produce distributed by ten times because I hate to tell a farmer, "I'm sorry, I can't accept your 45,000 pounds of plums because we have no way to store it or distribute it." **Some small investments in the food banking system would resolve many of these problems for farmers and certainly get food out to people who are hungry.**

Toulu Thao, HUD: I think a lot of you have expressed a lot of great ideas but I think the bottom line is this. **We're going to need leadership and we need dollars to make it happen. If a leader is serious about this, as Tim said, we must be able to have funding so we can use the good people, create good structure of coordination and also distributing these foods to various groups. This Central Valley feeds not just here.** When I travel to Canada the label here is also there. Everywhere we go. In fact, they sell our products here worldwide. **There is no reason why we cannot feed our people here, but we cannot talk too much. We need action.** That's what is lacking in this community is action, and **when action needs to be in place we need dollars.** Therefore, **we're talking policy. If you're serious about this, we need to be able to allocate some dollars to help make things like teams that operate and be a little more self-sustaining.** We can do this. I don't think we can talk forever. As someone said earlier, **so much food is wasted out there.** I travel every day to the farms. **Food was tossed on the side of the street because you**

cannot sell this product. They're not good enough (to market), but they're still very good and they're still healthy. I think we as a community, if we're serious about this, there is a way it can be done from locally, state, and federal. **I think together we can do it. It's doable.**

Eddie Jessup: Thank you, Toulou. One of the reasons I asked Billie to be here is because she serves so many meals a day, probably 90,000 a day. She is a 'consumer'. **What would it take for Fresno Unified to buy produce from our local farmers?**

Billie Richardson, FUSD Food Services Director: I was sitting here listening. About **eight years ago, we did accept fruits and such during the summer months for the School Food Program as extra food to serve. It was not a part of our National School Lunch; it was just an addition to our National School Lunch Program. Back then we had difficulty with the distribution, getting it to the sites that we needed it at.**

We have 127 sites where we serve meals. Out of that we have 57 that we do on site cooking, so we would need delivery to 57 sites on the day we needed it and it's very difficult sometimes to know what's going to be available for planning the menu that meets the nutrient analysis required by USDA. It has to do with distribution and knowing what product is going to be available, and that it's going to be there when we need to serve it. I'm sure there's a way to do that and I'm not sure what the solution is, but any time fresh fruits and vegetables can be served on the National School Lunch we're doing everyone a service as well as ourselves and the students.

Eddie Jessup: Billie, you use **Department of Defense Fresh Commodity** produce, is that right?

Billie Richardson: That is correct. We have that ordered. **We order it from up north and they bring it down to us but we only have that delivered to our one location. It is normally the fruit that has been prepared in pineapple spears, that type of stuff, orange slices, because of the way we have to pack at the packaging center.**

Eddie Jessup: My understanding is the **USDA has the Department of Defense contracted to distribute fresh commodity product and right now that hub is up in the Bay Area so any of the food that goes into fresh commodities goes up there and then comes back to us.**

Participant question: Is that actually fresh product?

Billie Richardson: Yes.

Participant question: The federal government is trying to move fresh product? I don't know of any of my clients that are selling fresh product to the USDA program. They're selling non-perishable products.

Billie Richardson: I have a list right here in front of me of what the products are that we can buy and that we do buy. **We have grapes, we have whole carrots, we have cantaloupes; we have romaine and iceberg salad mix, apples, pears. These are all fresh. Tangerines, kiwi fruit, sliced apples.**

Participant comment: So the government must be, and maybe our USDA person can tell us, but the government must be going out and buying that on the conventional market.

Billie Richardson: I believe that is what's happening.

Participant comment: Okay, which is really interesting because you are trying to basically use the government as a mechanism for buying your product and sourcing your product when you may be able to do much better by going to Sysco.

Billie Richardson: No, I don't think we would...

Participant comment: I'm talking about if you included all the costs, what the taxpayers subsidize, and all of that.

Billie Richardson: Yes, now if you're looking at it that way that's very possible. I would think that local produce any time should be more reasonable in price than buying from someone that has to ship it to us, but I'm not sure that's the case.

Jeanette Sutherlin, UC Cooperative Extension: These are all very critical issues in terms of the quantity, quality, and the process in how we access foods. I have worked in the arena of nutrition in education for children for years. And, until children understand and accept that food, they're not going to eat it anyway. So we have to go back to our families and back to our schools and we have to be at a place where we help our children to understand how important these foods are. In this case, we're talking about fresh produce, how important that is in their growth and development. What we've found with children, if you let them grow it or let them make it, even let them cut it, they will eat it. But, if you put it down in front of them and it's not something that they get all the time they don't eat it.

Dennis Stewart, USDA: Does anybody have questions? I remind people to please say your name before you make your comment or question.

Saul Eskin: I'm new to this. I'm sitting here with a large number of bureaucracies, and I mean that in the best sense of the word. I'm saying to myself, "The government is subsidizing farmers to the tune of \$15 billion. Now, they're not doing that because they're not getting pressure through lobbies, legislators, whatever, to make that happen. *I want to know what you're doing to promote more government funding for things like distribution and why you haven't been able to get it.*"

Vernon Crowder: I'm going to give an opinion here. The subsidies to agriculture do not make food cheaper. This is a fallacy. It's largely perpetuated by agriculture because politically it's a good *rationalization for their subsidies*. Subsidies actually raise the value of farmland because if you can get better payments out of the government that are tied to the land, which is how our subsidies are, it raises the value of the property. Well, when you raise the value of the property that raises the value of your operating costs so when it comes to why food is cheap, **food is cheap because of the market. It's cheap because of the investments that have been made in technology. It is because of the government subsidies of universities that have helped develop new agricultural techniques.** So, food over the years has become very cheap because of just how the industries and sciences have matured and evolved and because of the market incentive to sell more products. Food is not cheap because of subsidies.

I consider subsidies a very inefficient way and it certainly doesn't feed people. I would also challenge even our government officials here. If we looked at the cost of the Food Stamp Program just from an administration point of view of trying to put food into poor people's mouths I suspect there is a very, very high administrative cost and I just wonder if it wouldn't be more efficient just to simply raise the welfare payment.

Whom does a food stamp help? It's a USDA program because then you can try to say it's helping the farmer by selling more food. So, Food Stamps become an agriculture subsidy and a political issue. Those are the real things we have to address. What are we trying to do? We're trying to educate people so they can get a better job; we're trying to improve their

income. Some of that may be that as you educate people some people may have to move to other markets where there are better jobs for their skills. Just subsidizing with food stamps or subsidizing agriculture doesn't make food cheaper.

Saul Eskin: I appreciate your comments but **that was not my question.** I'm not defending subsidies or not, but **I'm saying that pressure is being put on government agencies to get more money for properly distributing food. What are you doing about increasing funding for adequate distribution?** I haven't heard the answer or any comment on that.

Dennis Stewart, USDA: Well, I don't think that's a question directed to me. It's directed to the people who are in this room. I'm with a government agency where I'm personally not allowed to lobby. **Congress makes decisions on appropriations. So, I think the gentleman's question was if there is not enough money what are the other folks in the room doing to try to get more money.** Is that your question?

Participant comment: How are we talking to legislators? How are we talking to our local representatives? How are we getting in contact with the Senate and the Congress people to bring the problem of the cost of distribution and how they're half doing the job they want to do by not looking into this problem? I want to know what you're doing right now to influence the legislature, which is really where the money comes from, the government, more than waiting for private contributions.

Tim Reese: I think, it has to do with public policy and it has to do with politics. It's frustrating sometimes that I meet people in the agriculture industry who feel that subsidies to the industry are perfectly fine but subsidies that feed people are not. I constantly get questions about the value of food stamps – why do they need it, they're all overweight, they could get a job – yet the same people are being economically supported through subsidies to the industry. *I think we need to address the political will to feed people in our community.*

The irony is feeding hungry people in America is good business for the farmers and the agriculture industry. Until the agriculture industry realizes that for their own self-motive and self-benefit, they need to get on the bandwagon to help us feed the hungry more efficiently. When people realize the benefit to their own self-interest, then we can move beyond this stalemate.

David Lighthall, Relational Cultural Institute: Just a comment on agriculture and the food system. Agriculture is in a very weak position within the larger food system. In normal distribution and marketing farmers can't pass on costs. They essentially *auction off commodities* and that's why Tom (Willey) is so smart for getting in on direct marketing a long time ago to where he sells directly to consumers through his **community-supported agriculture** and he can pass on those costs much more effectively.

There is clearly an opportunity here to have a win-win situation if you can figure out everything in between. I just want to draw everyone's attention to another sort of angle and that is not just direct marketing of fresh produce but the whole idea of value added in terms of food manufacturing and that addresses some of the problems that **Billie faces every day in her food system.** A community that has a model, perhaps, on this value added food manufacturing for Fresno is Taos County, New Mexico, and I invite you to do a Google search on the Taos County Economic Development Corporation in Taos County, New Mexico. They have a food incubator program where they are generating lots of jobs and new businesses and creating new markets for local farmers through branded food products that are coming out of that food incubator.

Rev. Walt Parry, Fresno Metro Ministry: Just to follow up with what you said, Vernon (Crowder). I think that with every program we always need to look at it to see **what its real goals are and what's the best way to do it.** I did want to note, though, that most of the people who utilize food

stamps, the EBT card, are employed people and not eligible for a welfare program. So, it might be increasing what they're paid in some way. **Most of the people that have food stamps and depend upon that for nutritional purposes are people that have jobs, work full time, and still don't have enough money to get the food they need.**

Tom Willey: I think Vernon did get to the root of this thing. **It's very inefficient to try to take food to people that don't have the money to pay for it. I think the most efficient way for people who are hungry to eat is to give them enough income to where they can buy the food that's readily available in their community.** Particularly in this area because we have a huge, historical population of migrant and seasonal labor in agriculture. They are a very large part of our hungry community.

We have been focusing on our farm to see how many **full-time year-round jobs for field workers we can produce on a small acreage of 75 acres.** I think we need to look at how we can encourage and give **incentives to agriculture in this area to start providing more full-time, year-round employment on their farms** because we have a very generous climate here. It's amazing what you can grow all year round if you really concentrate on it.

Why should we be subsidizing farmers to overproduce commodities that can't be sold, that there's no market for? **Why don't we subsidize them for the number of people that they employ full time year round in their operation?** Why don't we have more rational subsidy programs or pay them a subsidy to quit using chemicals and it will improve our environment? That is what we're focusing on at our farm and I think we have begun to create an effective example of that. **I think we need to encourage more farms in this area to have an economic incentive to employ more people year round. Those people that are employed year round in farming are not living high on the hog; but they have money to go and buy groceries every week. Then you don't have to worry about giving them free food in an inefficient manner.**

Edie Jessup: I know that there are many more questions. **Walt Parry, at the outset called for a task group that might begin to actively solve some of these problems.** We need to have all the stakeholders at the table.

Would you would participate in the solution making, the action-making that needs to happen at a variety of levels for us to be able to begin to solve both the agricultural sustainability, the ability to have sustainable jobs, and in the interim get available food to folks who are hungry and need it for their health?

Can we call on you for a **task group to begin to work on this, with a three-month window of creating solutions.**

Billie Richardson, FUSD Food Services: I think that each one of us has to look at what we can do and I would be more than willing to put myself forward to work on a committee to try to find a solution. I don't know that we will be able to, but **if we don't start, we certainly will not be able to find one. As a group of this size, we should be able to make a difference. I feel that School Food Service does make a difference in the life of a child and the families out there. It allows them to spend their money for other things instead of the two meals and a snack a day that we serve that they could have to pay for their kids. We're lobbying for extra funding for nutrition education. We are lobbying for commodities that meet the nutrient standards instead of the high-fat content with the American School Food Service Association.**

Edie Jessup: Billie, could we look for your purchasing power from Fresno Unified if there were a co-op of some sort where you could buy your commodities?

Billie Richardson: I think that we have to look at the distribution of it and yes, we could look at that

Toulu Thao, HUD: I see a lot of the small farms struggle because there are no local buyers, no direct market the farmer can sell to. They have to drive their trucks to markets like L.A. or San Francisco. If the committee can put a plan together and help these farmers, that is good. I'd say the Food Stamp Program or the WIC voucher, can give these farmers an opportunity to sell their products and they don't have to go to L.A. or far away to get rid of their products. Most of the time, they're just wasted in the field. So, I would support the committee and whatever I can help.

Jeanette Sutherlin, UC Cooperative Extension: I'd like to state that I think that it's important for us to realize we have come a long way and it's a long way in a positive direction. **I served on the first board organizing the Community Food Bank and that was 20 years ago. I went out and I visited with superintendents of school districts until every school district in Fresno County offered school breakfast, and that was 15 years ago at least.** I agree we have come a long way and we should congratulate ourselves on that. Like Tim said, we have to understand what **the vision is that we have for ourselves and for the families of this community** so that they not only **survive but that they thrive**. That's the direction that we need to take. I'd like to encourage every one of you here to go home today and **encourage your kids to eat breakfast**. It's the best thing that we can do. **Billie wants them to eat at school. I don't care where they eat, but eat breakfast.** I would like to say that the University of California Cooperative Extension will be a supporter in this, but our true passion is nutrition education and helping families.

Vernon Crowder: I think the key we really drilled and Tom (Willey) addressed it in part, we really need to focus on the root causes of these issues: **it's income. In the long-term, good education is not only going to empower people, it's going to give them some skills and not only help them read and learn why nutritious eating is important, but also to get the job they need.** There are so many disincentives in our system today to create jobs.

I will tell you that a private business and even government employers know that when you hire somebody there is so much fixed cost associated with hiring people. Obviously, healthcare is a big one, and the tax system. There are a lot of ways we could indirectly raise people's income by not just a year-end tax credit, but how about subsidizing the initial tax payments towards disability insurance, unemployment insurance for the lower income groups, the first \$10,000 people make? Why are you paying any withholdings? The other thing has to do with not only our legislation but also our court rulings. Most companies now view every employee they have to hire as a walking liability. That's because if you ever need to change your production habits, you're likely to have to pay a whole lot of exit costs and probably even lawsuits. There needs to be some rationalization of that so employers feel more comfortable about hiring people instead of going through temp agencies to try to hide themselves from that liability and those costs.

There is something wrong with the system. We're not only not educating, we're not giving incentives to create jobs. We're creating more incentives to kill jobs. I know that it was mentioned here, minimum wage, for example. I hardly know an economist that won't tell you that increased minimum wages kills jobs. *There is a reason why kids aren't serving gasoline anymore. It's because of minimum wage laws. There are no jobs for teenagers because of minimum wage hikes. There are better ways to transfer wealth to the poor rather than trying to interrupt the market mechanism.*

Tim Reese, Community Food Bank: Yes. Community Food Bank is committed to helping to sustain agriculture, provide access to nutritious food for everyone in our community, and to create good-paying jobs in our community, so we'll join with you in those efforts.

Blong Lee, FCEOC: Fresno County EOC is also committed to promoting this effort and planning with you in this effort. What Walt said earlier about a local plan for meeting the hunger needs,

that's something that we're trying to do. We are actually trying to do a three-year strategic plan to help meet the food security needs of this community and so we're 100% behind that. Thank you.

Tom Willey, Farmer: I would be happy to join a taskforce if anybody thinks that there is benefit to be gained by that. We like to think of ourselves as *already helping to create a solution to the problem through the evolution that we're going through on our farm.* We're in partnership with 350 families in this community and in Madera County who receive a subscription box of produce from our farm every week. We directly subsidize the full-time employment of farm workers year round on our farm as well as get better, fresher, higher-quality food for themselves, improve my income as a farmer, and help to remove a lot of toxins that we might otherwise use if we had to be in a market system that would not more fairly reward us. So if any of your communities and particularly your faith community is interested in talking with us about learning about this model. Or, how you can help participate or support both our own farm and how you can help to proliferate this model in our communities so we can get some competition, which we don't have right now. We would very much like to talk to you about that. You can speak to me or you can speak to Patrick and you can look at our display in the back of the room about what we're doing.

Edie Jessup: Tom, do you take food stamps?

Tom Willey: We're not able to receive food stamps at this time. We don't have that set up.

Rev. Walt Parry: On the topic of food stamps for the record's sake, **60% of people that do utilize food stamps are on welfare, 40% are not eligible for welfare, so Food Stamps are a corrective.** I think that we have so much to learn from one another and it is really important that people from many different perspectives and people that come at this topic from different issues learn from one another and that we work together to see if we can't improve things in the community. So, I hope that this will be a springboard for that happening and build upon those things that have already been happening.

Dennis Stewart, USDA: On behalf of the Department of Agriculture, we're committed to trying to improve the well being of the citizens of this valley.

In that regard, let me mention something that most people might be unaware of. *For families in California, if there is a family of four and there is a wage earner at the minimum wage, that family has an income that's about 60% of the defined poverty index.* Once you add food stamps and earned income tax credit to a minimum wage family's income, only then does that family get even close to the poverty index. In addition, the poverty number is quite suspect in terms of the family being able to live a reasonable life.

So, the Food Stamp Program is one of those income support programs that allows working families who are working at low wages to be able to survive and with the hopes that their children might move ahead in the next generation.

We want to cooperate with you. We have two Hunger Fellows that we are sponsoring here to try to come up with some solutions. **The Food Stamp Program offers food assistance to all of those who meet income requirements.** USDA figures statewide show that about half the people who are eligible for food stamps are not receiving. There is a significant amount of money that could be injected into the community, significant amount of buying power, significant support for low-income families. But, we need your help to make it accessible, to remove those barriers to participation, whatever that may be: fear, public charge for the immigrant community, problems with transportation, or confusion about the program.

One of the things that the USDA would like to ask you to do is to **help cooperate with us because community groups usually have a much better relationship with low-income people. They have the trust and they can help promote the program.**

I do want to express my support for my colleagues from the University of California Extension because our department is also very seriously **promoting nutrition education. One of the greatest health problems in this country is obesity and low-income people suffer disproportionately because people are buying high-calorie foods with food stamps or with low incomes that they have available. What we want them to be doing is to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. Because, really, it's in the interest of the health of the community.**

What we'd ask the community to understand is that it is pay now or pay later. You pay now in terms of investing in nutrition and education or you pay later in terms of monumentally rising healthcare costs, which are plaguing all of our country. So, nutrition education and food assistance are vital, not just to the individual but to the health of the community. And yes, **USDA is willing to participate in finding right solutions here in the Central Valley.**

Edie Jessup: Thank you, Dennis, and thanks to all of you here for your excellent discussion today. **We will reconvene those of you in the audience who would like to participate, who need to participate in this task group. Walt says that together we are going to accomplish a solution in three months. I love it!** I hope that you will join in solution making. Thank you very much. We're going to adjourn to a press conference.

Attending this Forum:

Melissa Daigle, Food Stamp Program Outreach Coordinator for the Western states, USDA; Laura Tatum, Hunger Fellow from the Congressional Hunger Center; Dennis Barrett, Hunger Fellow from the Congressional Hunger Center; Ken Smiley, Fresno Metro Ministry; Larry Trullinger with Healthcare for All Central California; Jeremy Hofer, Fresno Metro Ministry; Ingrid Carmian, Fresno Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides; Tony Gonzales, senior health education specialist for state health programs and board president for Fresno Metro Ministry; Pat O'Neil, T&D Willey Farms, Community Supported Agriculture Program; Diane Scott, Community Alliance Magazine; Julie Molina, regional social worker, California Diabetes and Pregnancy Program; Catherine Quinn with the California Health Collaborative; Evi Hernandez with the California Health Collaborative; Robin Wood, California Health Collaborative; Glia Kong, Fresno Community Hospital; Naomi Sosa, Families First; Sarah Hashmian, Islamic Cultural Center of Fresno; Barbara Lundeen, involved in world food problems; Al Evans, representing the CROP Walk; Penny Leff, Berkeley Farmer's Market, helping farmers' markets to take EBT cards; Timothy Thole, USDA San Francisco, overseeing children's nutrition programs in California; Phoua Moua, Fresno Metro Ministry; Saul Eskin, retired businessman, charitable work, distribution; Lauren Alving, physician; Lavo Sareto, Fresno County EOC, Operations Director for Refugee Services Program; Tu Fong Tao, Fresno EOC; Carol Mills, concerned member of the community, running for Fresno Unified School Board; James Collier, Community Food Bank; Daytra Laden, Community Food Bank; Tia, grower of strawberries; Yu Chang, strawberry grower; Brooke Wentworth, Food Link for Tulare County; Barbara Cline, Employment and Temporary Assistance Department, Food Stamp Program specialist; Johnnie Belford, Program Supervisor with E&TA, Outreach Services to the Community; Judy Lemus, Deputy Director, Employment and Temporary Assistance; David Lighthall, Research director at the Relational Cultural Institute; Sanjiv Kapoor, Fresno Metro Ministry volunteer; Kate Mackney, Head of the Family Nutrition Program; Julie Yee, Food and Nutrition Service in the Public Affairs Office; Dennis Stewart, Western Regional Director for the USDA Food Stamp Program; Walt Parry, Fresno Metro Ministry; Keith Kelley, Fresno West Coalition for Economic Development; Tom Willey, T&D Willey Farms in Madera; Billie Richardson with Fresno Unified; Michael Yang, UC Extension, Small Farm Program representative; Jeanette Sutherlin, UC Cooperative Extension; Toulou Thao, HUD; Blong Lee, Fresno County EOC; Tim Reese, Community Food Bank; Vernon Crowder, former agricultural economist

The packet contains: announcements CROP Walk, 10/24; Annual State Food Stamp Forum in Sacramento 10/13; issues brought forward by the Center for Rural Affairs, and news articles: Michael Yang (UCCE) was interviewed by the L.A. Times and an article on food stamp use in Tulare County.

**Join the Food Resources Task Group for an Interdependent Food System
meeting Tuesday, September 28.
Noon – 1pm at Fresno Metro Ministry
Sustainable Agriculture, Nutritious Food Access, and Jobs
Call Edie for more information: 485-1416**