

Solano Land Trust switches gears

New food relief program



Solano Land Trust Executive Director Nicole Byrd Braddock dropping off Eatwell Farms cauliflower at Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano in Fairfield. (Courtesy photo)

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It wasn't in Solano Land Trust's original mission statement in 1986 to get into the butchering business.

But COVID-19 has thrown a monkey wrench into the Land Trust's usual role in conservation.

The nonprofit organization's intent has always been to keep ranching and farming families on their properties. So, with an eye on the roller-coaster needs of the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, the Land Trust initiated "Farm to Community Food Connection," designed to put the meat and produce of local agricultural operations at the table of Solano County families in need.

With various donations and grants, the Land Trust started purchasing livestock animals — including some auctioned via the Solano County Virtual Fair — which were processed, with more than 2,000 pounds of meat delivered to the food bank.

Complementing the meat distribution were 1,000 vegetable plants donated in partnership with Morning Sun Herb Farms to people in need throughout the county.

It's all about thinking outside the hiking trail for the 16 Solano Land Trust employees, including conservation director Tracy Ellison, a former-4-H member raised in Fresno County.

Working from home takes an adjustment, Ellison acknowledged.

“You tend to put out fires all day long at the desk,” she said.

With those who aren’t out doing fence repair and leading hikes, “you were getting your work done, but weren’t feeling part of the community any more,” Ellison said by phone Wednesday afternoon.

Land Trust Executive Director Nicole Braddock suggested the organization commit “to something in the community that we could do that supports our mission.” Especially, says Ellison, after the Dixon May Fair was canceled: “What about the kids who show their animals and have livestock auctions?”

“I couldn’t fathom how they could get them sold and get their money back,” Ellison said.

She ended up bidding \$1,700 and winning a pig at the Dixon May Fair online livestock auction.

With the help of a \$10,000 grant from the Solano Community Foundation, the Land Trust purchased additional “project animals” raised by Solano County 4-H and Future Farmers of America youths.

“Not only are we buying animals, we’re working with local growers to get local produce to the food bank,” Ellison said, noting that many growers are hurting with restaurants, school lunch programs, and cafeterias of large corporations shut down because of COVID-19.

“The markets aren’t there,” she said.

Ellison expects the Solano Land Trust to continue with his food program into October when the harvest season begins. With some tweaking, it’s gone well, she said.

“I think we started out with some expectations in understanding logistics,” Ellison said. “Are we getting the meat processed in a way the food bank can receive it? Is it properly cut, wrapped and frozen? How is it delivered? I think it’s become everything we thought it could be.”

Ellison continues to work on three major projects that includes \$6.2 million in grants and another 2,200 acres of protected land.

Obviously, she awaits the day when COVID-19 is history and all parks and trails and school programs sprout again.

For now, it’s distributing more than 1,000 vegetable plants and getting food into the hands of those who need it most. According to the Food Bank of Solano and Contra Costa County, they are seeing an increased need from families that are food insecure. Pre-pandemic Solano County, an estimated 43,650 people (including 14,080 children) did not have access to enough nutritious food to live a healthy life. In 2020, this number is likely to grow by 23,690 (including 9,510 children).

Rose Loveall, owner of Morning Sun Herb Farm, heard about the partnership between the Solano Land Trust and the food bank and wanted to participate.

“I am delighted to provide plants for people to grow their own food,” Loveall said in a press release. “This pandemic has caused people to pay more attention to where their food comes from and inspired many to grow their own gardens. I hope that these plants will provide wonderful and tasty produce for our community over the next few months.”

For more, visit solanolandtrust.org.