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By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times About 30 years ago, one farmer fed about 56 people. Today, that same producer can feed 155 people.

Kansas Secretary of Agriculture Dale Rodman brought those numbers to the forefront as a community food network launched a month-long statewide food drive to reduce hunger in Kansas.

Rodman said he hopes everyone will participate in the “Neighbor to Neighbor” campaign from Harvester’s – the Community Food Network to help those in need.

“Also, take a minute to say thank you to the men and women who raised that food,” he said.

State leaders, including Rodman and Governor Sam Brownback, participated in a friendly competition in February to launch the drive.

The drive is jointly hosted by the Kansas Department of Agriculture, Dillon’s Food Stores, Harvesters, the Kansas Food Bank, the Second Harvest Community Food Bank and the Kansas agricultural community and will culminate on Kansas Agriculture Day on March 19.

The groups hope to raise 50,000 meals for Kansas families during the drive. Kansans can contribute to the campaign at Dillon’s Food Stores statewide. Brownback said he is amazed at the generosity Kansans show to neighbors in need.

“This food drive gives them an opportunity to help their fellow Kansans, to reduce hunger across the state and to support our state’s farmers and ranchers,” he said. “When you are shopping for grocers for your family, I encourage you to take part in this important campaign. While one food drive won’t end hunger in Kansas, together, we can make a difference.”

On Feb. 18, the governor teamed up with staff from food banks to compete against Rodman and his team of representatives from Dillon’s. The teams boxed food items for Kansas senior citizens in need.

The Kansas State FFA officer team and representatives from Kansas agricultural organizations were also on hand for the event. Brownback’s team put together 109 boxes in 15 minutes, but

Rodman's team was able to fill 176 boxes in that same amount of time.

"The Neighbor to Neighbor food drive can help us reduce hunger in Kansas, but it also gives us a chance to say thank you to our state's farmers and ranchers," Rodman said. "Today's farmers and ranchers work 365 days a year to raise food to feed your family and mine. They work to continuously improve their practices to raise safe, wholesome food."

At the kick-off event, Dillon's made an initial donation of 8,000 pounds of non-perishable food items. Those food items were used to build a display Kansans could see in the state capitol from Feb. 19 through March 1.

Dillon's spokesman Sheila Lowrie said 67 store locations, including Liberal's, are participating in the drive, and she said food banks have picked up supplies on a regular basis.

"Materials are now up in Liberal, and people who want to do so can make monetary donations at the register through a \$1, \$5 or \$10 donation card," she said. "They can also make perishable donations at a drop box. Coin boxes are available for donations of loose change or bills."

Lowrie said the stores also have lists of the five most needed donation items, which include peanut butter, canned soup, beef, fruit and cereal.

She added working with the Kansas Food Bank, Dillon's has located pantries throughout the state associated with the food bank, including Liberal's Stepping Stone Shelter, where local donations will go.

Stepping Stone Executive Director Pat Allsbury said donations from the Neighbor to Neighbor campaign will add to the shelter's food supply.

"We already get food from both Dillon's and Wal-Mart, who are participating agencies with the food bank," she said. "We also get pizzas from Pizza Hut, who is participating in a Harvest Support Center. They bring pizza pretty regular from all three stores."

Last week alone, Stepping Stone received two big donations of foods from both Dillon's and Wal-Mart, and Allsbury said the shelter is pushing more than 2,500 to 3,000 pounds of food through its doors on a weekly basis.

"Dillon's participates through their meat department and through the bakery," she said. "We don't get a whole lot, maybe 100 pounds a week from Dillon's. That's all through the food bank."

Allsbury said when food is donated to Stepping Stone normally, food cupboards in Liberal share in the fruits of the harvest, but with Neighbor to Neighbor, the rules have changed a little.

"For this particular one, since most of it would be new and purchased, we'd probably try to divvy it up equally among the four," she said.

Since Stepping Stone receives food donations on a regular basis, the month-long drive will have

little effect on the shelter's food budget.

"We're probably down to, on food itself, less than 2 percent," Allsbury said of how much of the shelter's budget is spent on food. "That doesn't include the things to process the food – Ziploc bags and Saran Wrap – but the food itself is all donated in massive quantities."

Allsbury likewise explained one of the other differences with the Neighbor to Neighbor campaign.

"Those weekly pick ups, because we use my vehicle and my staff muscle to go pick it all up, we do get first choice, and we also have to record weight and temperature on it," she said.

Allsbury did say, though, this drive will be of use to all of Liberal's food cupboards.

"Those only so many heads of lettuce you can use in three days, so everybody else gets plenty," she said.

Allsbury said in addition to the local cupboards associated with the Kansas Food Banks, other suppliers are available in Liberal.

"There are a lot of them that give out food baskets and boxes that are not a member of the food bank," she said.

Joanne Metcalf of Liberal's Church For All Nations, the headquarters for Food For All Nations, one of the local Kansas Food Bank cupboards, is excited about the opportunity for the state of Kansas to rally together to reach out to people in need.

"I love that our governor is leading the participation, and I am thrilled that we will have the ability to be a blessing to even more people in our community through the generosity of others," she said.

To learn more about the Neighbor to Neighbor campaign, visit www.agriculture.ks.gov/neighbor2neighbor.

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