

Bringing local produce into the school

Lopez farmer makes an offer the school can't refuse

By **TED GROSSMAN**
Editor

"We've been talking about farm to school, and farm to cafeteria for years, but nothing ever got started," said Henning Sehmsdorf.

But instead of "wringing his hands," the Lopez man who owns and operates S&S Homestead Farm decided to take matters into his own hands. Last week he promised to provide the local school cafeteria with a weekly supply of lettuce, kale and beets, and he'll accept whatever the school is able to pay him for the produce.

That will be far less than the going rate. Public schools pay a lot less for locally grown meat and produce, thanks to a commodities program of the United States Department of Agriculture, and an arrangement by which many public schools collaborate to purchase their fresh food from a single distributor, Food Services of America.

Sehmsdorf discovered last year just how great the disparity can be when he sold the Lopez school some of his potatoes. His price was \$1 a pound. The school could have bought them through an existing program for 28 cents, so that's the amount they paid Sehmsdorf.

The potatoes were a one-shot deal, but the lettuce, kale and beets will be provided throughout the academic year. Sehmsdorf isn't

intendent Larry Johnson, meanwhile, has indicated that the school is willing to "pay a little more" to help make the arrangement work, and that the commitment has the support of the school budget committee.

Last year Lopez High School students raised enough money from the community to buy a cow from local farmer David Bill. The fundraising drive was so successful

other local farmers and ranchers will participate in the program and that, eventually, all food fed to children will be locally grown, fresh, organic and extremely healthful. He is hoping that his approach will become a model that school districts across the country will endorse.

In fact, some schools are now going in this direction. Lincoln Elementary School, in Olympia, now serves its students an organic salad bar while managing to cut lunch costs by 2 percent. The school did this by eliminating desserts.

Similar-type programs exist in selected schools in California, New York and several New England states.

Washington Congressman Rick Larsen is also trying to lend a helping hand.

He is sponsoring a bill that, if approved by Congress and signed by the President, will provide grants of up to \$100,000 for farm-to-cafeteria projects.

"The school is willing to pay a little more to help make the arrangement work, and that the commitment has the support of the school budget committee."

LARRY JOHNSON
Lopez Superintendent

expecting much money, but he says he's willing to do it because he'll be able to grow another crop of these vegetables at his farm during the winter. He also expects to get a tax break by selling his produce for this amount. Lopez Super-

intendent Larry Johnson said that there was enough money left over for the school to buy another one this year. Each cow should provide several months of hamburger meat, school kitchen Manager Dana Cotton said.

Sehmsdorf is now hoping that

The Islands' Sounder

Sept 22, 2004

(vol. 40 no. 01)