

Giving Season

Donated meat program provides food for hungry

by JEANNINE OTTO

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GRIDLEY, Ill. — For a group of central Illinois farmers and hunters, helping the hungry and donating to a food bank is something that doesn't happen only at Thanksgiving and Christmas, it's something that goes on throughout the year.

The Ringger family, Steve, Stan, Scott and Brent, have started a program in which farmers donate live animals, which are then processed at a meat locker, owned by the Ringgers in Gridley.

The meat is donated each month to the Midwest Food Bank in Bloomington.

"The true heroes are the producers," Steve Ringger, who coordinates the program, said.

The program donates 3,000 to 4,000 pounds of ground meat, packaged in one pound packages, each month to the Midwest Food Bank.

"That food bank serves 500 nonprofit agencies in the central Illinois area and will soon open a second facility in Peoria to serve 90 agencies in the Peoria area.

Nine pork producers donate light hogs, at around 150 pounds, on a regular basis and the plant processes about 30 to 40 head of hogs monthly.

The animals are processed at Gridley Meats, a locker plant which has been in the community for more than 30 years and which was purchased by the Ringger family in 1999.

The pork producers are joined by deer hunters and beef producers in donating animals to the program.

Donations of deer for the program fill in at a crucial time in the fall when farmers are in the field and don't have time to deliver hogs.

The deer donations also help out when the locker is busier processing deer and may not have time to process the usual number of hogs for the program.

"We've probably got 3,000 pounds of venison right now and that's all donated by hunters just from the first shotgun season," Ringger said. "Last month we had people bring in a whole beef each."

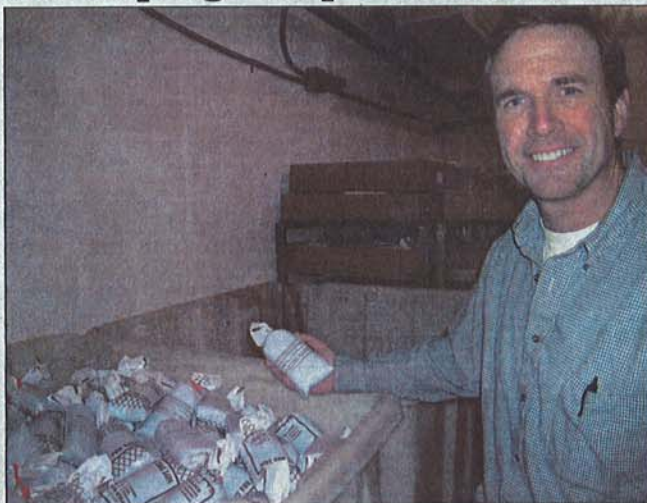
All of the meat is processed into ground meat and packaged into 1-pound packages. The pork is split between ground unseasoned pork and seasoned sausage.

The program started on a local level.

"We purchased the locker back in 1999 and we started doing the ground meat product for the local food pantries probably about four years ago," Ringger said. "Most of those animals were coming off my brother Stan's farm."

For the pork producing family, the decision to help the hungry is a natural fit.

"We always were taught to



AgriNews photo/ Jeannine Otto

Steve Ringger, coordinator of a program that sends 3,000 to 4,000 pounds of ground meat, on a monthly basis, to the Midwest Food Bank, shows a package of ground venison. The Ringgers began the program four years ago. The ground pork, ground beef and ground venison is processed through Gridley Meats, a meat locker owned by the Ringgers.

give to charity as we grew up," Steve said. Stan and Brent still operate the family hog farm in rural Gridley.

The Ringgers knew Dave Kieser, president of the Midwest Food Bank board of directors, through church connections.

Kieser is one of three brothers who started a food bank in a two-car garage on their rural Bloomington farm four years ago.

That food bank, which started providing food to 10 agencies, has expanded from the garage through a machine shed on the farm and now occupies a 27,000 square foot facility serving some 500 nonprofit agencies.

When the Ringgers heard about the Midwest Food Bank and its work, they decided to grow their own program. Adding on in the hopes that other producers would be inclined to give regularly was a leap of faith.

"We had some extra time here so we thought we'd just take it a little bigger," Ringger said. "We built a walk-in freezer with a bigger door so we can get pallets in and out of there, we tore down our old holding pens and built new ones assuming that the pigs will come."

Steve and Scott work for feed company JBS United. Steve's job as a sales consultant helped him find those giving producers.

"I've got all kinds of connections and I tapped into that for finding other producers to donate lightweight hogs for the program. So far, nine producers have signed up and Ringger expects to have more as word of the program gets out.

The nine producers pledged a given number of hogs that they would donate in a year. Donors aren't held to specific delivery dates for their hogs and donors can pledge whatever they feel comfortable in giving.

"We built a pen in the back with waterers and feeders so they can drop them off," Ringger said. "We built a big-

ger pen because we had producers who said I don't want to bring you 10 animals every two weeks, I want to bring you 30 head and be done with it for six months."

Light hogs gain tremendous value when they are marked for the meat donation program.

"Packers have been giving less and less for light pigs so you can donate a light pig, which means you're not giving up a lot monetarily but as soon as that meat hits the processing floor and gets processed and gets delivered to a family, it goes way up in value," Ringger said.

"The bang for your buck is just huge."

All the meat is donated and the locker processes the meat at cost. Funds to cover the processing costs are donated by companies such as State Farm Insurance and churches and charities including the Apostolic Christian Church of Gridley.

"The pigs are donated by the farmers and Gridley Meats processes the meat at cost. We process the meat at cost so it's a non-profit product," Ringger said. "We are reimbursed for our costs by local churches and charities."

Kieser said he looks at the meat through the eyes of someone who will be consuming it.

"I always try to place

myself in the place of the person who is receiving that food through that agency," he said. "If I was sitting at that table, how much would I appreciate a balanced meal?"

While the food bank, which serves only non-profit agencies registered with the state of Illinois, receives single donated shipments of meat, the regular donations mean that the agencies can provide all the components for a balanced meal all year long.

"To have the meat program and the deer hunters and the farmers, it insures we'll have meat every month to distribute to those agencies," Kieser said.

"I think that's so significant that we're not just relying on one load of meat that companies donate - and we do have that and we appreciate it. This is a program that we have fresh product that we can count on every month."

Ringger has hope and faith that more donors will agree to join the program.

"It's been a little slow," he said. "We could use some more. We need more pigs and we're not asking people to donate any more than they feel comfortable donating."

One aspect of the program that appeals to current donors is that they know their donations are in a form that is a direct help.

"This meat - 100 percent of it goes to charity - it's not like 10 percent of it goes someplace else," he said. "When you give animals, you know exactly where it's going. This goes 100 percent right to the table."

When the Ringgers talked to Kieser about expanding their local program to make regular meat donations to the Midwest Food Bank, he said he wasn't surprised.

"It was maybe not so much of a surprise," he said. "I think it's why there is this whole heartland in the United States."

"It's called the heartland because we produce abundant crops but also because it's an area where people come alive when they have the opportunity to help others."

School for vegetable growers set

SCHERERVILLE, Ind. — The Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service and University of Illinois Extension will sponsor the Illiana Vegetable Growers School on Thursday, Jan. 3.

The event will be held from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Teibel's Restaurant in Schererville.

"This school offers commercial vegetable growers and market farmers opportunities to learn more about pest management,

