Locavores Celebrate the Season with Potluck

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Folks line up at the local foods potluck held Wednesday night. Brianna Gibbs/KMXT photo

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More than 100 community members gathered last night at the Kodiak High School commons for a potluck dinner celebrating local agriculture. Goers filled their plates with locally harvested salmon, organically grown vegetables, big game chili and other samplings of more than a dozen local goodies generously donated by local growers, hunters and fishermen. The event was hosted by Kodiak Soil and Water Conservation District and was meant to showcase just how far local agriculture has come thanks to the rise of hoop houses.

Mark Kinney extols the virtues of local foods to a potluck gathering in Kodiak Wednesday night. Brianna Gibbs/KMXT photo

Mark Kinney is a district conservationist through the Homer Natural Resources Conservation Services field office. Despite being delayed a few days by the weather, Kinney landed in Kodiak yesterday afternoon and was able to attend the potluck to speak about the seasonal high tunnel program that helped generate the produce boom in Kodiak.

-- (Harvest Potluck 1 :41 “It was part of the know your farmer know your food initiative. And what they did was they established a pilot program, 38 states in the nation could participate, not all states, they wanted to see whether the seasonal high tunnel program would work. And immediately, we didn’t, green houses is what we saw. You’re gonna pay people to build green houses? I mean that’s just something that this agency has never done. We’re pretty much are not horticulturists, we work with people on larger land basis than that. They convinced us they said this is a program, it’s coming form the top levels of the administration and so we expect you to promote it. Well it turns out they weren’t really green houses, in fact they’re not supposed to be greenhouses they’re called hoop houses, seasonal high tunnel growing systems.”)

Kinney said the technology has come so far that the hoop houses are actually more effective than a green house would be in Kodiak because of the weather.

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(Harvest Potluck 2 :38 “And I knew that in Kodiak with the weather that we have, and this was another example this year of why a seasonal high tunnel is such a good idea in an area like this and in Homer. We kind of, it didn’t take much to promote. I just went out to a couple of meetings, I said listen we’ve got a program here that I can’t believe we’re funding, and these are large dollar contracts. We’ve committed over $7 million in Homer and Kodiak over the last three years for this program. Some of these contracts are $45,000 a piece. Most of the Kodiak contracts are higher than the Homer contracts because of the off road nature of it. But what was amazing was in three years we have now funded 241 high tunnels in Homer and Kodiak .”)

That’s more than any other field office in the entire nation. Kinney said the numbers are phenomenal, especially considering a lot of people still don’t know what a high tunnel hoop house is.

-- (Harvest Potluck 3 :31 “And what’s interesting about this is it just seems to be getting warmed up. We don’t have the new allocation for the new budget; the new farm bill is being haggled out in Congress. We don’t know when the new farm bill’s gonna come. I have a feeling we’re going to be limping into 2013 with the 2008 farm bill and then I think there will be a 2014 farm bill and that will start out what’s new. But what happened this last year was that this high tunnel program, which was a pilot project, was so popular nationwide, especially in Alaska and other states, that they went ahead and promoted it to a national initiative.”)

Kinney said people don’t normally associate Alaska with agriculture, but with this program local food can actually become a feasible option for communities.

-- (Harvest Potluck 4 :27 “What’s true about this program is that it fits Alaska better than any other state. And what’s happened in the case of Kodiak we have 43 contracts now for high tunnels. 198 of those are also in Homer. We have 97 applications for the next round, 22 of those are in Kodiak. And so when we get our new allocation, if everything stays the same like it looks like its going to, we will probably fund another 23 high tunnels in Kodiak, that pushes the number to over 60.”)

The high tunnels in Kodiak helped make the summer farmer’s market the best one yet, with multiple vendors selling excess fruits and vegetables from their personal hoop houses.

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