

Food Bank's dilemma: Longer lines, less food

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STAFF WRITER

There's a squeeze these days at the Second Harvest Food Bank of the Central Coast — longer lines of hungry people, and fewer crates of food.

The Food Bank says its member agencies gave food to 38,000 people in July. That represents a 65 percent increase over July 1990 figures, when it served 23,000 people.

For four hours on the first Monday of every month, the Errington Road facility serves as a distribution site of USDA surplus food for South County. Because of Labor Day, the distribution was held yesterday, and the line was long, stretching to the railroad tracks, Food Bank director Willy Elliott-McCrea said.

That dramatic increase is part of a clear trend since December, Elliott-McCrea said. The need has been greater by a wide margin each month, hitting a peak of about 41,400 in May, most of those in Santa Cruz County.

"It just went way up and has continued," McCrea said.

The non-profit Food Bank is a hub for the distribution of private food donations and government and industry surplus in Santa Cruz and San Benito counties and North Monterey County.

Representatives of emergency food pantries, churches, dining programs for the poor, homeless shelters, group homes, day-care centers and other groups make appointments to "shop" at Second Harvest Food Bank.

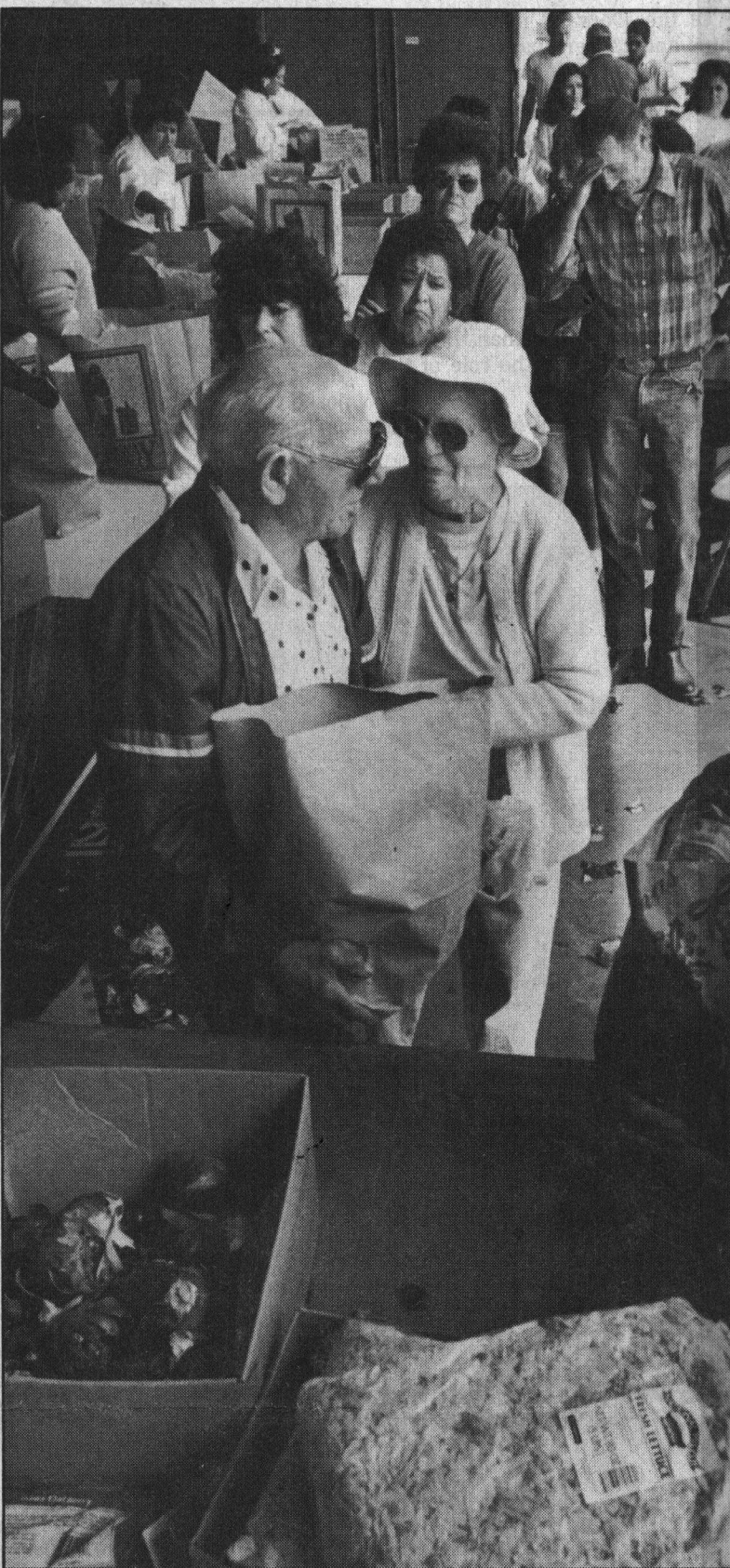
They can buy dry goods and canned food for 12 cents a pound, and produce for 4 cents a pound. The money goes toward the Food Bank's costs to collect the food and maintain it.

Local growers say the weather is a major culprit in a decrease in agriculture-related jobs this year. Important crops have been smaller or completely damaged, some due to the December freeze, the March rains, or the foggy summer.

For example, Steve Siri, a flower grower, said the freeze pushed back his cut-flower crop by about a month, so he missed out on the Mother's Day market and had to discard a large part of the crop. The freeze was also blamed for a late strawberry crop.

"Some of these things may be good for the market," Siri said, referring to the limited supply keeping a crop's price up. "But it means you don't hire as many people."

Apple growers have blamed the fog for slowing down the



Kurt Ellison

Food Bank volunteer Peg Hervey (in white hat) helps one of 1,325 people who got food yesterday.

ripening process, so they missed getting the jump on Washington apple growers. That will cut into their market niche, possibly affecting the number of people they hire.

Many of the hungry the Food Bank is serving usually work in agriculture or food processing, Elliott-McCrea said. This year, even many who have jobs are working only three days a week, or fewer hours a day, he said.

Adding to the crunch, he said,

is that food-industry surplus is down across the nation, most likely because of the recession.

Fortunately, he said, Food Crops, a new program also headquartered in Second Harvest's building on Errington Road, has "really taken off this year." Food Crops secures fresh produce from local growers for distribution to the hungry.

The Second Harvest Food Bank accepts cash donations sent to P.O. Box 1633, Watsonville 95077.