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Everyday People: John Dean plants healthier foods in state food banks

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John Dean helps county residents eat fresher, healthier food while generating healthier food-based businesses.

For John Dean, eating means more than filling a body with fuel to keep it going.

Eating means there's a system in place that gets food from the farmer to your fork, and Dean, 26, came to Clatsop County to study that trail of crumbs back to its source.

As an AmeriCorps volunteer, Dean arrived in September to connect the dots in the area's local food system, starting with local farmers, ranchers, fishermen and ending with anyone who eats. He's working for Clatsop Community Action Regional Food Bank and the Oregon Food Bank for one year to help county residents eat fresher, healthier food while generating healthier food-based businesses.

"There's not much else that touches so many people," Dean said.

He's begun a community food assessment, and asks questions to figure out what could be changed to make the system more efficient and profitable - and ultimately, healthier.

For example, he's found that beef producers have to travel hundreds of miles to find a USDA approved slaughter facility. And he's learned how the county depends more on locally-sourced food because it is so isolated.

This is Dean's second year participating in a Resource Assistance for Rural Environments project administered by the University of Oregon's Community Service Center. During his first RARE year, he worked as a city planner for the city of The Dalles, using skills he fine-tuned while studying planning at Iowa State University. He took a break from the program to work a year on a farm near Santa Cruz, Calif., and then headed south to teach sustainable farming in Costa Rica.

Being in Clatsop County, however, has let Dean pull people together who may come from wildly different backgrounds but share a common interest in food.

A coalition of interested parties has been formed - from farmers and retailers to concerned citizens - and they include participants throughout the North Coast, including Tillamook and Pacific (Wash.) counties and may expand their focus more regionally. A core of leaders has come to the surface, and with Dean's help they've settled on a handful of projects for the next year.

More farmer's markets, community gardens and general food system education are definitely topics the community will be hearing more about in the months to come, Dean said.

And what started as a one year position might just lead him to stay in the area permanently.

"By the end of that year we'll have just scratched the surface," he said.

And with so many people wanting to change how they eat coming forward to participate, he's hoping to take it deeper.

"There will still be work to do, which is why I want to stay," Dean said.

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