

Check It Out: You Already Paid For This Year's Food

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On Feb. 7, just 38 days into the year, the average American household had already paid for its annual supply of food, according to statistics from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. That figure even includes eating out.

In comparison, to pay local, state and federal taxes, the same wage and salary earners must work until May 3, or 123 days.

Which reveals that food is a bargain for American consumers and Food Check Out Day held by the Women's Committee of the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, puts that agricultural headline squarely in the public eye.

Farmers and ranchers in the U.S. are the most productive in the world, plus the food they produce is the most affordable in the world.

To most families Food Check Out Day is oblivious, but not to Ronald McDonald Houses (RMH) who partake of the bounty of Food Check Out Day. The RMHs provide lodging for family members whose children with serious illnesses are being treated at nearby medical centers.

To rural Pennsylvanians even Farm Bureau families — the presence of an RMH means a home away from home in times of stress and uncertainty. The rural population in Pennsylvania is greater than in any of the 50 states. The comfort of having an RMH nearby cannot be measured by those from out of town who stay in them.

In relation to the five RMHs located inside the Keystone States borders, the participating county Farm Bureaus sought cooperation from their respective communities. Rising to occasion with drives for food commodities, household supplies, and monetary offerings whereby RMH pantries could be stockpiled, were various clubs, churches and schools that were eager to



Members of the Somerset County Farm Bureau pack the van with 30 and a half crates of food and supplies collected through community support for Food Check Out Day on Wednesday, Feb. 7. From left, Kurt Walker, SCFB vice-president; Phil Lehman, SCFB director; Harold Shaulis, SCFB president; Fred Boucher, SCFB director; Denise Rohrbaugh, SCFB secretary, and Food Check Out Day spokesperson for the Somerset to Erie region and Oscar Market, SCFB director. Donations from the PFBs 18-county region, to Pittsburgh Ronald McDonald House were estimated at \$10,000.

adopt a community service project.

Marlin Miller, manager of member relations at the PFB office in Camp Hill reported the following initial (donations are still arriving) statistics from Food Check Out Day: Danville RMH — \$15,870; Philadelphia RMH — \$15,250; Pittsburgh RMH — \$10,000; Hershey RMH — \$9,502; Scranton RMH \$4,429.

These are estimates of the combined food, supplies, cash and gift certificates in each region.

"We are getting a lot of coverage in the media," Miller said. "The point is being made more

clearly that food is inexpensive in comparison to taxes."

When representatives in the district from Somerset to Erie arrived at the Pittsburgh RMH, spokesperson Denise Rohrbaugh, who is secretary of the Somerset County Farm Bureau, said that in Somerset County alone, more than 30 and a half crates were transported in the produce van of Farm Bureau director, Phil Lehman. Lehman runs a vegetable operation with his son on the Garrett Shortcut near Berlin.

The groups that responded to Rohrbaugh's letter of invitation to participate were the Rockwood Chapter of the National

Honor Society, St. Peter's School, Somerset Boy Scout Troop 131, the Country Clovers 4-H Club and the county commissioners office in the courthouse.

Crawford County's 2,700 items were collected by one school and one church, Rohrbaugh reported.

"We did excellent this year," Rohrbaugh said in amazement. "We unloaded and unloaded and unloaded."

The bounty well exceeded that of Food Check Out Day 2000.

"While Food Check Out Day celebrates the efficiency and productivity of America's farmers and ranchers, the current tough

economic times that agriculture faces," said Guy Donaldson, president of the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, "cannot be overlooked."

"Low commodity prices, shrinking foreign markets, and escalating regulatory cost are threatening the very fabric of the American farm."

He added: "Prices at the supermarket certainly don't reflect the historically low commodity prices producers are receiving today. The farm to retail price spread is at a record low," he concluded.

Somerset County Farm Bureau president Harold Shaulis commented: "As Farm Bureau members, we provide a wide variety of services, not only to farmers but also other members of the community. We all have a vested interest in our communities and work hard to make them a better place to live," he added.

Besides being the state vice-chairman of the Dairy Promotion Program and a member of other dairy-related state organizations, Shaulis is an active 4-H leader, church member, and a member of several panels relevant to local government.

About 28,000 farm and rural families in 54 county units are represented in the PFB.

The non-governmental, voluntary farm organization is affiliated with the nation's largest general farm organization, the American Farm Bureau Federation, which is comprised of 5-million members.

In conclusion, Marlin Miller expressed his thoughts about Food Check Out Day having been held for the third time, with very upbeat comments.

"I think it's a wonderful project, a great networking of rural communities," he said.

"It causes us to interact more with our neighbors out there. People are willing to work for the common good of all."

Want to Get Rid of Trash Quicker? Just Add Water

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Trash in a municipal landfill could decompose about 10 to 20 times faster than it normally does through a system that keeps the trash continuously wet, new research suggests.

Landfills are normally dry environments, and the lack of adequate moisture doesn't allow biodegradable trash to decompose as quickly as it should, say researchers at Ohio State University.

In fact, keeping a landfill saturated means it could stabilize in five to 10 years, instead of taking the average 100 years or longer to do so, said Ann Christy, an assistant professor of food, agricultural and biological engineering at Ohio State. In a stabilized landfill, the majority of trash has decomposed.

"Quicker decomposition rates mean more room for more trash in the same landfill, which would cut down on the need for additional landfill space," she said. "This also feeds into recycling — once the biodegradable material decomposes, we can extract recyclables from the landfills, then the landfills aren't filling up as quickly."

Christy is currently experimenting with moisture levels in two laboratory-scale wet-tomb bioreactors. A wet-tomb bioreactor is a self-contained unit with

water purposely pumped in — the water creates an environment suitable for bacteria to actively decompose waste. The water is recirculated throughout the system.

Christy's research appears in a recent issue of the journal Applied Engineering in Agriculture. She co-authored the study with Olli Tuovinen, a professor of microbiology at Ohio State, and Michael Myers, an engineer with the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

Christy and her colleagues monitored the experimental bioreactors for 15 months. Each bioreactor — or bin — was filled with approximately 3,300 pounds (1.5 metric tons) of non-shredded municipal solid waste collected from a local sanitary landfill. (While many small-scale landfills require waste to be shredded in order for it to fit, shredding is not economically feasible for a full-scale landfill, Christy said.) The bins were 3 feet long, 6 feet wide and 3 feet tall. The researchers could watch the decomposition through a 2-by-2.5 feet Plexiglas observation window installed in each bin.

The waste in one bin was covered with a single layer of sludge — sewage already decomposed by bacteria. Sludge has been used

in landfills to help increase the rate at which trash decomposes. At the beginning of the study, researchers poured distilled water into each bin, until they saw the water draining into the liner under the bins. The used water — or leachate — was continuously pumped through the bins again via leachate recirculation pipes.

While the researchers did not get the decomposition results they had hoped for — the mass in the bin with the sludge layer decreased by one percent (to 3,009 pounds) in 15 months, and the mass of the other bin decreased by 1.3 percent (to 2,989 pounds) — they are confident that keeping a relatively high level of moisture in a landfill would increase the rate of decomposition, Christy said.

She attributed the lower-than-expected decomposition rates in this study to the lack of adequate amounts of bacteria and also the lack of heat production. Paper and plastic comprised 70 percent of the solid waste in these bins, while the two most readily biodegradable products, yard waste and food waste, comprised less than 5 percent of the total mass.

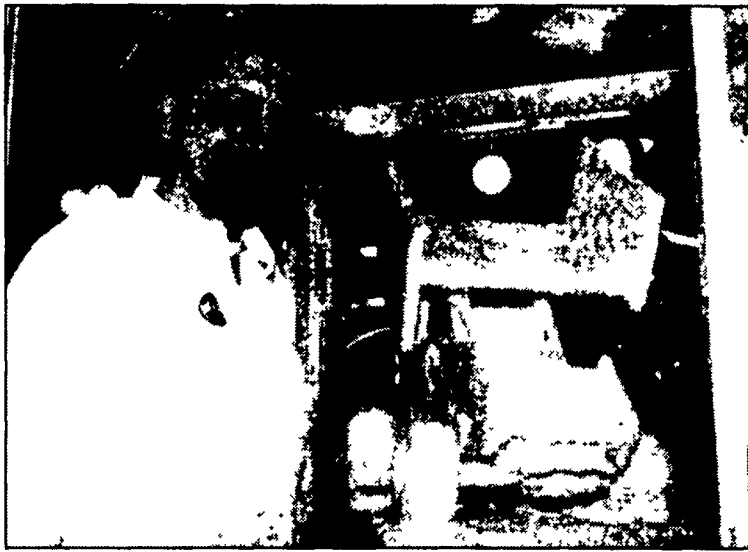
"The disproportionate amount of recyclables (paper and plastic) in the bins were undoubtedly a hindrance to the bacteria's success in breaking down the trash,"

Christy said. "In a full-size landfill, the types of trash would be more evenly distributed."

Christy is continuing the experiment, and says the next step is to take the technology to a full-scale landfill.

Because it is a self-contained system, constructing a full-scale wet-tomb bioreactor would be

costlier at the outset, Christy said. Unlike current landfills, the bioreactors need the machinery, such as pumps and pipes, to recirculate leachate. But they would save money in the long run, because there would be no need to collect leachate and take it to a treatment facility, as is necessary with current landfills.



Sculptor Jim Victor displays his buttery creation of a sprint car, a work in progress at the recent Pennzoll Motorsports Show, Fort Washington Expo Center. The Philadelphia sculptor used 100 pounds of butter donated by Land O' Lakes, Carlisle, to mold the car modeled after Port Royal's 2000 sprint car champion owned by Lance Dewease. Victor will create another butter sculpture at the Motorama Indoor Races and Speed Show at the Farm Show Complex, Harrisburg, Feb. 16-18.