

FISH TO SCHOOLS: Transforming School Lunches in Sitka, Alaska

Summary

In 2010, no local fish was served in Sitka schools. In 2014, all 1,825 children in public, private, boarding, alternative and HeadStart schools had access to locally-caught fish lunches thanks to the Fish to Schools (F2S); a partnership between fishermen, schools, food service contractors, seafood processors and local organizations.

Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARCH) provided a sub-award of their CDC Community Transformation Grant to implement the program based on Farm to Schools approach to reduce childhood obesity.

Challenge

A 2014 Alaska report on obesity showed that about 2 of 3 Alaskan adults, 3 in 10 high schoolers and 4 in 10 pre-kindergarteners of varying demographic backgrounds are overweight or obese. Chronic illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease have become major health problems in Southeast Alaska, from which Alaska Natives suffer disproportionately.

Schools have an excellent opportunity to improve children's nutrition. Students learn many of their life long behaviors here. Healthy, local food, like salmon links children to their community and culture. The American Heart Association recommends eating at least two servings of fish a week for improved nutrition. In 2010, the challenge was getting fish from the docks to the lunch trays of students. This was surprising considering Sitka is the 9th largest commercial fishing fleet in the U.S. and students didn't have access to fish.

""This is a paradigm shift, moving away from the "heat & serve" meals that are common to most districts in the nation. Through partnerships, we developed systems to source, process and prepare kid-friendly dishes that compete with processed meals.""

- Andrew Thoms



Solution

With CTG support, Sitka Conservation Society fostered partnerships between schools, fishermen, food service, and seafood processors to create a school lunch program that offers locally caught fish. Each August, commercial fishermen donate a bit of their coho salmon catch to F2S. Seafood producers process the fish. Food service prepares scratch cooked fish meals for students. Fishermen come to lunchrooms and talk with students about their meals. Third graders receive Stream to Plate lessons. The community hears media stories about Fish to School throughout the year. A free resource guide and lesson plans is available for schools interested in developing their own Fish to Schools program.

Success Stories

<http://nccd.cdc.gov/dchsuccessstories/>

Results

During a five year period from FY11-15, F2S increased the number of students receiving access to locally caught Alaska fish in school lunches from 0 to 1,825. This presents 100% of students in public, alternative, state boarding, Head Start and private schools with access to local fish lunches.

May 2014 evaluation survey: 99% of teachers and school staff have confidence in the F2S program. 93% of elementary and middle schools students surveyed "loved or liked" the fish

From FY12 to FY14, there was an increase in the number of pounds of fish acquired by Sitka Schools of 668%.

F2S helped inspire the Nutritional Alaskan Foods for Schools (NAFS) grant. In FY 2014, every Alaska school district applied for the funding and the majority of districts used the funds to purchase locally-caught seafood for their lunch programs.

Sustainable Success

Fish to Schools is expanding through partnerships. Southeast Conference, a regional economic development organization, coordinated the first Southeast Alaska Fish and Farm to School Conference in April 2015. This takes the program from a Sitka start-up to a program that reaches the region and begins to institutionalize serving local fish.

The fishermen donation program and additional grants allowed schools to pilot the program without cost in Sitka. After a few years, there was increased demand by parents to expand the program to other schools. The large increase in the number of pounds of fish acquired by schools is because of the NAFS program. Fishermen donations alone could not have met that demand without the NAFS program.

Your Involvement is Key

Bring Fish to Schools to your Alaska community. The need for improved school nutrition is essential for overcoming childhood obesity. When schools offer healthy fish the whole community benefits. *Healthy and nutritious source of protein *Bolsters local economy *Culturally significant *Addresses local food security *"it tastes really good!" (Sitka 3rd grader).

http://www.sitkawild.org/a_guide_to_serving_local_fish_in_school_cafeterias



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