

This is KPTZ FM 91.9 in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Rachel Perkins, bringing you news and commentary from the Jefferson County *Beacon* for Wednesday, March 26, 2025.

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Jefferson County farms, food banks, and school districts are scrambling to plug holes created by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) termination of funding for two programs that provided more than \$1.1 billion for schools and food banks to purchase food from local farmers and producers in the U.S. The four food banks and one mobile unit operated by the Jefferson County Food Banks Association (JCFBA) serve an average of 3,400 households per month. The number of households served rose 24% in 2024.

The purpose of the terminated FDA programs was to maintain and improve food and agricultural supply chain resiliency. The locally-grown food bolstered feeding programs, including food banks and organizations that reach underserved communities. In addition to increasing local food availability, the funds help build and expand economic opportunities for local and underserved producers of food. Kai Wallin, Community Liaison with the Port Townsend School District, said that the District received funding from both programs, Local Food for Schools (LFS) and Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA).

The Olympic Peninsula Community Action Program (OlyCAP) had an LFPA grant that served nine sites in Jefferson and Clallam counties. Between August 2023 and December 2024, LFPA funded food purchases from farms in Jefferson and Clallam counties and distributed 135,875 pounds of food and produce to these sites. Jefferson County food banks, local farmers, and school districts with whom we talked say that the USDA's decision is likely to increase food insecurity among vulnerable populations and also create economic hardships for the farmers who previously supplied local produce to schools and food banks.

LFS (Local Food for Schools) was a cooperative agreement between the federal government and state entities in Washington to identify producers of Washington-grown products and make those products available for free or at a subsidized cost for schools. For the 2025-2026 school year, \$660 million was going to go towards purchasing regional foods such as salmon, berries, lentils, tortillas, and squash and providing those foods to schools at half market price. The contract for this coming school year was canceled, so while these products will still be available, they will no longer be subsidized by the USDA.

The *Beacon* has also learned that food bank officials in six states are reporting that up to \$500 million dollars in funding for food banks through the USDA emergency food assistance program has been frozen. Vince Hall, the Director of Government Relations for Feeding America, a nationwide network of over 60,000 food banks, pantries, and distributors, said that rural communities are likely to be most deeply affected. Emergency food assistance programs like this are, "the food lifeline for rural America" because they come with funding to improve food storage and distribution, which can be more challenging in rural areas.

If you're interested in supporting local purchasing for food access, you can donate to the WSU Extension Olympic Peninsula Farm to the Food Bank Fund, or donate to the Jefferson County Food Banks at <https://jcfba.org/> and click on the Donate Today link.

Reporting on this story by Scott France.

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The Quilcene School Board spent nearly three hours on Wednesday, April 19, debating whether to break Washington State law and their own policies by requiring students to play on a sports team aligned with their birth gender. Almost an hour of that time was taken up by public comment from the packed room, most of

which was from people urging the school board not to attempt to change their current policy. This is not the first time that the Quilcene School Board has debated violating state law to discriminate based on gender.

The board invited Curtis Leonard from Pacific Law on November 6, 2024, to advise the board on the legality of changing their discrimination policy. Leonard advised them that they would be in violation of state law and that the Quilcene School District would likely lose its state funding, which constitutes roughly half of the School District's overall budget. The board ultimately decided to wait for further guidance from the state and will debate their policy again at their April meeting.

Reporting on this story by Nhatt Nichols

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