Bridgeton innovation center will try to invent tasty NJ-grown school meals

By THOMAS BARLAS Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, August 4, 2010 |

BRIDGETON — The state and a Rutgers University facility here will spend the next year developing “innovative” ways of integrating New Jersey-grown produce into school food programs.

Project officials want to create a wide variety of products — that could include soups, smoothies, salads, fresh-cut fruit and vegetable snacks and possibly vegetable lasagna — by the time the project concludes at the end of 2011.

Whatever is developed faces an obstacle more potentially difficult than the required research and development and the meeting of federal nutritional guidelines: Students must actually like the stuff.

To that end, it’s likely students will eventually test the foods to determine which products should be developed for school breakfast, lunch and snack menus, said H. Louis Cooperhouse, director of the Rutgers Food Innovation Center on Broad Street here.

Diane D. Holtaway, the innovation center’s director of client services, said there’s growing support for the project from New Jersey farmers, who consider it another market for their fruits and vegetables. They consider turning their wares into wholesome processed foods with an extended shelf life as a new business worth trying, she said.

“When kids are in school, it’s not the main harvest time,” Holtaway said. “It extends the seasonality by a value added operation.”

“It’s basically almost like extending the season,” state Department of Agriculture Secretary Douglas Fisher said of the Food to School program. “We have this (produce) glut in the summer when the kids aren’t in school. As we move into the school year, (schools) start looking for other sources of food. Anything we can grow in our state that can be turned into something kid friendly and nutritionally appealing is good.”

Rutgers and the state Department of Agriculture will fund the program with a $51,000 federal grant. New Jersey is one of 18 states to get the grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture as part of the federal government’s National School Lunch Program.

There’s been a growing movement for years to improve the nutritional value and diversity of foods served in
The movement was started in part to deal with the growing problem of childhood obesity. The efforts are paying off: A growing number of schools, in part to meet nutritional requirements established by state governments, offer more fruits and vegetables on their breakfast and lunch menus.

As one example, efforts to improve the health of students and staff at the Landis School in Vineland resulted in the school winning a national award earlier this year. Part of the program encouraged healthier eating by students and staff during lunch.

Cooperhouse said the innovation center here is a perfect place for the Food to School program: The center and its users work together to develop a product, determine if it’s marketable, and how it can be marketed. Foods are cooked and packaged at the center before eventually being distributed to customers. The entrepreneurs rent part of the facility for a day.

One such product is Paleokit, a blend of free-range beef jerky, raw nuts and dried berries that Camden-based Steve’s Club sells on the Internet and to fitness and conditioning programs across the country.

As like other businesses, Steve’s Club rents out part of the center for the day. Workers were in a processing area on Wednesday, filling plastic bags with the mix.

“Working with the Food Innovation Center has really allowed me to take my business to the next level,” said Steve’s Club founder Steve Liberati. “Their expertise has been absolutely invaluable.”

There is still a lot of work to be done by the state and the Rutgers center on the Food to School program. The products that are developed must:

Meet nutritional and portion control requirements.
Be convenient for school cafeteria staff.
Meet cost requirements for schools that also allow for profits for farmers.
Evaluate whether the possibility of the products being made available for distribution in school vending machines.

“It’s those kinds of innovations that are perfectly ripe,” Fisher said.

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