

## **Farm Service Agency employees turn bountiful harvest into local blessing**

*By: Leslie Warner  
Michigan FSA County Operation Trainee*

The Farm Service Agency (FSA) takes great pride in its reputation as the “can-do” agency in both the Department of Agriculture and the local community. David Meister of Apply Valley Orchards of Manistee Inc. has worked with his local FSA office in Cadillac, MI for years; certifying his crops, purchasing insurance and applying for disaster assistance. But in October 2011 he called FSA for a different reason. He had rows of yellow delicious apple trees heavy with fruit and no one to pick them. In 2009, he participated in a USDA People’s Garden Initiative gleaner’s project and if he could get some help picking, he hoped to donate again.

Michigan apple producers experienced a bumper crop in 2011. In fact, according to the Michigan Apple Committee, the yield was 40 percent larger than average. Yet sadly during this time of plenty the poverty rate in Michigan rose to 15.5 percent, nearly half a percent higher than the national average.

When FSA program technicians Patty Salasky, Benita Meekhof and Angie Case received Mr. Meister’s



*Cadillac FSA Program Technicians (from left) Benita Meekhof, Patty Salasky and Angie Case show their trailer of apples gleaned from Apple Valley Orchards of Manistee Inc.*

call, they were determined to make sure the surplus apples made it into the hands of those who needed it. On a cold rainy day they rolled up their sleeves, picked up their bushel baskets and got to work! Jim Meekhof donated his time, truck and trailer to help. Together they picked and loaded 25 bushels or 1050 pounds of apples.

“For many apple producers their hard work really paid off this year, they had a great crop. We weren’t surprised when Mr. Meister called our office to donate apples, we all knew we wanted to lend a hand,” said Virginia Pulford, Cadillac FSA County Executive Director. “Many Michigan families are having a hard time financially; we’re so proud to have led this project and made use of this fresh fruit.”

The produce was donated to the Lighthouse Café, a mission project of the Lake City Christian Reformed Church. The Lighthouse Café provides a weekly free meal to members of the community and the apples were distributed to 80 families thought northwest Michigan.

This wasn’t the first time the Cadillac FSA participated in food collection. In 2009 they spearheaded a gleaner’s project through the People’s Garden Initiative, a USDA program focused on establishing community and school gardens throughout the country. Mr. Meister participated in their initial collection. When he was contacted by the FSA, he wanted to help but was apprehensive about liability, opening his orchard to the public and remaining in compliance with Good Agricultural Practices (GAP)

requirements. The Cadillac FSA provided him with information about the Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, a statute employed by the People's Garden Initiative, which addressed Mr. Meister's concerns and made it easy for him to donate.

The result of not taking action would be easily observed in an orchard, over ripened fruit dropping to the ground. In a community the opposite is the case, it is much more difficult to detect the struggle of hunger in friends and neighbors. But with 1 in 6 Michiganders living below the poverty level, you don't have to look far to find someone in need. Fortunately, as was the case in northwest Michigan, the resources to help are often right at our fingertips. Through the partnership of an apple farmer, FSA employees and a faith based organization, the spirit of volunteerism was revealed in over a thousand pounds of fresh Michigan fruit.



*Jim Meekhof and Cadillac FSA Program Technician Benita Meekhof pick yellow delicious apples for donation at Apple Valley Orchards of Manistee Inc.*