

USRPA Encourages Good Nutrition While Promoting U.S. Rice Around The World

Part 1 of 2

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A program, now in its fifth year, is boosting rice, bean and soybean sales and educating the poor in Mexico, Central America and South America about good nutrition, according to Thomas Wynn, director of market development for the US Rice Producers Association.

Called The School Nutrition Program, the ef-

consumption and make rice a more viable food-stuff," Wynn said. "We've also exposed them to different recipes that are non-traditional, using local ingredients and cooking methods that are easier for them to prepare. As a result we have shown substantial increase in consumption in areas where we actually participated."

Early on, the School Nutrition Program also focused on industrial cafeterias, but organizers found it was more cost effective to operate only in the schools. As it is set up, there are approx-



An instructor hired by the Global Based Initiative program teaches the school cooks, who are mothers of the students, how to prepare rice and beans for the school children.

Photo by John LaRose

fort has fed over 1 million children to date.

"We focus our efforts in the western hemisphere because that is the primary market for U.S. rice," Wynn said. "Since Central America and Mexico make up roughly half of U.S. total rice exports, our promotional efforts of U.S. rice is very intensive in those areas."

"In Central America we have two types of programs operating," he continued. "One is called a Market Access Program or MAP, another is called a Global Based Initiative (GBI). The GBI program is coordinated in five countries, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua. In those countries we go into the community schools, and we focus on the rural and poorest of the socioeconomic groups. We teach the mothers, who are also the school administrators and cooks, how to prepare rice in a nutritional and economical manner."

Along with the volume of people reached in the School Nutrition Program, the organization has been very successful in boosting the consumption of rice, beans and soybeans. "We cooperate with the U.S. beans and soy organizations in that particular program."

Wynn estimates that the program has been brought to over 50,000 schools, most of which are very small neighborhood schools.

"In some cases, they are in suburban areas that are just very poor and they may have student attendance of 300-400 students," Wynn added. "In many, if not most cases, the schools are in rural areas with attendance of 10 to 20 children."

The goal of the project is to cover as much ground as possible and aid as many children as possible. Additional benefits of this program are that it is very effective in combating malnutrition that has been documented by the different governmental organizations in the countries; and the other longer term benefit is the students are developing a taste and preference for rice and beans.

"Key selling points are that, for the price of a Coke we can feed a child for a week, and in the very rural areas where we work their budgets are extremely tight," Wynn said. "One of the obstacles we have encountered in the past where we have incorporated our plan is that traditionally in these countries rice is not a standard dish. These are corn and bean folks."

Wynn said this is true even in Central America, although the further south you move there's more of an interest in eating rice. There's also a big disparity in rice consumption between Costa Rica and Guatemala, the north and south; the closer to the equator, the more rice is consumed.

"The northern countries are more of a corn base," he said. "Rice was prepared most typically for ceremonies and special events and the recipes they used involve large amounts of vegetable oil, and oil is very expensive. So rice was considered a luxury and expensive dish."

What this program has done with tremendous success is teach these people that they can use a tablespoon instead of a liter of oil to prepare a meal of rice, which makes rice a more economical dish to prepare.

"We've adjusted their cooking styles to boost

imately four two-person teams in each country. Team members, all certified cooks, go out to the schools and try to reach at least one school daily, depending on the proximity of one school to another.

"The school administrators will share the information with their compatriots in the next school," he added. "In order to evaluate the successes of the program, we do a follow up visit with the schools several weeks to a month after we have conducted our trainings to evaluate how much rice consumption has changed. We do that through a series of surveys with the participants and also, when possible, through point of sale data at the local stores."

In the first two months since the 2008 School Nutrition Program began in El Salvador, nearly 900 cooks in 64 schools were trained; low-cost nutritious meals were served to more than 23,000 children.

From January to June 2008, El Salvadoran rice association, ASALBAR, kept the program running while the U.S. rice industry awaited the passage of the Farm Bill. This support boosted the promotion of rice in over 160 schools, brought training to 3,188 cooks and reached nearly 60,000 children this year.

One special success is the tremendous support from the local governments and internal rice organizations in the countries served. ARROZGUA, the Guatemalan rice association, has donated tremendously to support of the U.S. program and indications are that support in Nicaragua and Costa Rica will increase for 2009.

"It is to the point where they have actually put up some of their own monies to increase the size of the program," Wynn said. "So that's additional, we see that as a positive movement from their standpoint. In a nutshell that is our GBI program," he summed.

"We also have in that part of the world the MAP program. MAP also targets the lower end socioeconomic groups but its focus is more in the urban areas. We work through markets, local community gatherings, where people come together to buy rice, beans and their groceries."

These settings are like farmers markets, even some low scale supermarkets.

"We conduct our promotions there, also with trained cooks, and that is more of a sampling type of approach where they're able to taste different dishes. We have recipe cards that are out at the point of tasting and if they like what they taste they take the recipe home and try it themselves," Wynn explained.

The MAP program is promoted in Guatemala. The program utilizes billboards, radio advertisement, and different events in the country to try to attract people to the promotions. This program does sometimes focus on cafeterias for community training. The MAP program has also seen a lot of success.

"In a nutshell, these are our Central American programs," Wynn continued. Δ

Editors Note: See next week's issue for the conclusion of this two part story. Next week's issue will cover Mexico Programs, South America Programs and emerging markets.

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