

Monterey County

BUSINESS

Biz bit

Salinas-based El Aguila Food Products started in 1956 as a small bakery and delicatessen specializing in Mexican food.

Source: El Aguila Food Products

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Program promotes health, ag

By DANIA AKKAD
Herald Salinas Bureau

A local program aimed at connecting Monterey County agriculture with healthful living is forging ahead, and becoming a possible model for schools statewide.

Healthy Eating & Lifestyle Principles Inc., or HELP, will hold a training session today for local school districts that are considering policies aimed to improve student health.

If successful, the program could encourage political leaders to pay for better food and nutrition education in schools,

LOCAL PLAN WOULD BENEFIT FARMERS, SCHOOLS

said Mike Pippi, HELP's executive director.

"We are trying to create systemic change," he said. "We are leveraging everyone's wonderful work and bringing it together."

HELP was formed last year under the leadership of Basil Mills of Mills Family Farms Inc. in Salinas. Its concept is fairly simple: Educate people on the benefits of eating fresh fruits and vegetables.

The outcome, at least

theoretically, is that people become healthier and farmers dig deeper into the local economy.

Financed by both public and private grants, HELP advocates removing soda machines from campuses, incorporating more fruits and vegetables in school meals, and encouraging healthful school fundraisers instead of the usual bake sales and candy drives, Pippi said.

Pippi, Mills and Monterey County Superintendent Bill

Barr on Wednesday discussed the program with representatives from the state superintendent's office.

"They said we were the only people in California approaching this in a unified manner," Pippi said. "They are eager to consider this a pilot program for the state of California."

HELP also plans to pitch the program in other agricultural counties in California.

"If we can get enough counties signed up," Pippi said, "we

can activate the agriculture businesses in these counties, then we can build quite a big strength and unity to advocate for increased funding."

The people participating in today's training will return to their districts to form "wellness councils" that must include teachers, food-service employees, parents and students. Those groups will meet in October to share their progress, Pippi said.

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