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OFFER YOUR FELLOW TEXANS A HELPING HAND

By Darren Turley

Between the drought and the economy, 2011 has not been an easy year for those of us in the agriculture industry or in communities largely supported by agriculture. Most of us are ready to say goodbye to 2011. There's something about turning the calendar page to January that signals a new beginning and inspires hope and optimism that the next year will be a better one.

As tough as 2011 has been, the holidays are a good time to pause amid the hustle and bustle and take time to reflect on our blessings. One of those blessings is the plentiful food most of us enjoy not just at the annual holiday feast, but every day of the year, thanks to our nation's farmers and ranchers.

The Texas dairy industry, for example, includes about 534 dairy farmers who produced just less than 1 million gallons of milk in October, ranking Texas sixth in milk production nationwide. Those same producers (and their cows) also helped make Texas the seventh leading producer of ice cream in the country in 2008, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Despite the drought and rising feed and fuel costs, these dairymen and other agriculture producers still manage to keep a wide variety of food plentiful and relatively affordable.

Yet many people still go to bed hungry. And we're not just talking about in other countries.

Sadly, in our land of plenty, 18 percent of Texas households are considered "food insecure," which means they live at risk of hunger, to varying degrees. Texas ranks fifth highest in the country for child food insecurity, with more than 1.8 million children at risk of hunger.

We may think we have experienced hardships this year – but 2011 certainly has been far from easy for these households who struggle even to feed themselves and their families every single day. For those of us in the food production business, it is only fitting that we do our part to make sure all Texans, but especially children, have enough to eat.

Beyond food, too many Texans have other needs. Nearly one in five Texans (4.41 million) are living in poverty.

The holidays are a warm and fuzzy time to help our fellow man. And that's great. But hunger and poverty don't end when the Christmas tree comes down and the last of the wrapping paper goes into the trash. There is need year-round.

If you can, please reach out in your community and do your part to make 2012 a better year for our fellow, less fortunate Texans. Consider it your first New Year's resolution.

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