Montana’s USDA DoD Fresh Distributor

Chris Gaskell, Grasmick Produce, Boise, Idaho

Meet the Distributor: Chris Gaskell

Chris Gaskell is the Institutional Business Manager with Grasmick Produce, based in Boise, Idaho. Grasmick Produce is Idaho’s largest distributor of fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as Montana’s current contracted USDA Department of Defense (DoD) Fresh vendor. Chris is part of a pioneering effort in Montana to make local food more available to schools across the state. He works with local producers to include their items in the DoD Fresh ordering catalog and its distribution route.

About Grasmick Produce and DoD Fresh

- Chris Gaskell, Institutional Business Manager, Grasmick Produce
- USDA DoD Fresh designated Grasmick Produce as Montana distributor, since 2017
- Swanson’s Mountain Valley Orchard’s (Corvallis, MT) Empire apples are the first Montana-grown product in the DoD Fresh catalog.
- grasmickproduce.com
- USDA DoD Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program
- Swanson’s Mountain View Apple Orchards

Markets

Grasmick Produce was founded in 1955 in eastern Idaho by potato farmer Henry Grasmick and his son, Dutch Grasmick. The father-son duo would haul their potato harvest to Boise to sell to grocery stores and restaurants. Potato sales were so good that Dutch decided to diversify. Starting with a full load of iceberg lettuce from California, he began to add product to their Boise distribution line. Fast forward to today: Grasmick Produce serves all of Idaho and Montana, as well as parts of eastern Oregon and western Wyoming. They service grocery stores, restaurants, hospitals, retirement facilities, prisons, reservations, universities, and schools.

Working with Schools

In November 2017, USDA DoD Fresh designated Grasmick Produce as its contracted Montana distributor. DoD Fresh is a program that leverages the Department of Defense procurement system to provide a variety of fresh U.S.-grown fruits and vegetables to schools.

Credit: Grasmick Produce
History of the Partnership between Grasmick Produce and Swanson’s Mountain View Apple Orchards

In the summer of 2019, Pam Fruh, the OPI School Nutrition Program’s food distribution program manager, contacted Chris as the designated DoD Fresh distributor for the region. She requested local apples to add to the DoD Fresh catalog for the Montana Crunch Program. Montana Crunch Time is a statewide event to celebrate local producers and National Farm to School month (October). Schools typically order a large quantity of local apples and do a ‘crunch’ together on the same day at the same time. Chris searched Montana apple growers and found Swanson’s Mountain Valley Orchard in Corvallis, Montana. Swanson’s introduced Chris to the Empire Apple, a cross between a Red Delicious and a Macintosh. This sweet and tart, yet firm and crispy, variety became the first Montana-grown product in the DoD Fresh catalog. When asked about the partnership, Chris explained “Pam Fruh was absolutely instrumental in helping orchestrate this to get kicked off. It was new for me, it was new for her, it was new for Swanson’s. And I feel like in the end it really worked out well for all parties involved, especially the schools.”

The Dirty Details

As expressed by Chris, the task of coordinating DoD Fresh distribution is taxing. “In the beginning, there is a lot of communication needed.” Understanding a diverse geography, maintaining fresh produce at a high quality, and intensive communication with a variety of stakeholders are a few of the many challenges Chris faces as the distributor. According to Chris, when it comes to locally sourced products in the DoD Fresh catalog, there are basic standards the producer must meet, including:

1. Retaining liability insurance naming the distributor as the additional insured body. This covers what attorneys deem necessary for product liability insurance.
2. Having a recall program, preferably with a third-party food safety audit, such as GAP certification, in case of an issue.
3. Offering enough product to service everybody in the targeted distribution area, as there is a minimum fill rate for the DoD Fresh catalog. Chris gave the example, “If a grower had, say, 10 cases of some sort of obscure and they wanted to market that with a DoD wholesaler, it probably wouldn’t work because one large school district could take those 10. Then, every other school that asked for it would not receive the product. It’s got to be something that you can have a fair amount of, so that if everybody asked for it you would be covered.”
4. Determining the shelf life and the availability of a product.
5. Presenting an invoice to the DoD distributor. An exception is made for local products to be added to the DoD Fresh catalog at a whim, yet an invoice is required. The pre-order time for a school is a minimum of three days once an item has been added to the catalog, so there is a slight lag between acquiring the product and the actual distribution. This might make it more difficult for highly perishable products.

Future of the Partnership

In 2020, Grasmick Produce was able to acquire more than twice the quantity of apples from Swanson’s than it did in 2019. Chris’s work to connect local producers with these national procurement systems is another example of how a producer can use a regional distributor to enter the institutional market. Chris believes that DoD Fresh is a major untapped distribution opportunity for local producers. He adds, “However, there are many factors that come into play when dealing with adding a local product to the DoD catalog.” Chris gives this advice to producers looking to negotiate with a DoD Fresh supplier (such as Grasmick):

1. Identify the contract holder of the DoD Fresh program in your area and make contact.
2. Have a plan in place that addresses harvest times and expected yield, as well as a fair price to help make your decision easier for the purchasing agent or contracting officer.
3. Think about key factors: Will kids enjoy it? Can you produce enough to meet potential demand? Can you comfortably offer it at a reasonable price that will be appealing to the schools?