

SALMON WITH A SMILE

The Smiley Brothers have taken hatchery fish that were going to waste and delivered them to those in need



Workers at Tillamook Bay Boathouse cannery prepare filets of coho salmon for canning Nov. 15 at the company's plant in Garibaldi. They are part of an effort to salvage salmon and tuna that might otherwise have gone to waste and route it to food banks, schools and senior centers.

See more photos of the workers and the Neah-Kah-Nie High students who help preserve and distribute the salmon and tuna to those in need at oregonlive.com/northwest

By LORI TOBIAS
THE OREGONIAN

NEHALEM — The men were all set to do their good deed. They had volunteers, a site, a plan, tools, pretty much everything required to catch, kill and process the hatchery salmon due at the Waterhouse Falls fish trap.

They hauled in ice, set up tables and sharpened knives. The rains came. So did the wind, the cold and boredom. The salmon, however, did not. As it turned out, fish have no interest in adhering to man's schedule. Many, after uneventful, miserable weeks, they broke camp and admitted defeat.

"We just kind of jumped in and found out the water was a little colder than we thought," says Bill Campbell, one of the founding organizers of the project.

But while they didn't come back with a whopper that time, they were far from cutting bait. Four years later, what started as a loosely organized group of volunteers has turned into The Smiley Brothers, a slick operation credited with delivering to

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PHOTOS BY RANDY L. BARNHART/THE OREGONIAN

Angelica Godnez (in red), 16, and Taylor Windet, 16, are among students at Neah-Kah-Nie High School in Rockaway who are helping with The Smiley Brothers program, which preserves and distributes hatchery salmon and tuna to those in need. Students completed design can labels and then attached the labels to thousands of the cans, as the two teens are doing here.

Fish

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the hungry more than 25,000 cans of premium grade fish and more than 1,600 meals of fresh coho filets. Now, organizers hope to see it serve as a model all over Oregon and beyond for how a community can focus on a renewable resource to provide food to people who have needs.

"We firmly believe this is a replicable model," says Mike Ehlen, who's been with the project from the start. "We think it can be replicated in other communities where there are hatcheries within proximity to canneries. That is a goal of ours."

This is one of those feel-good stories rooted in what was a not-so-feel-good fact of life. Innumerable hatchery fish were going to waste, all for lack of viable processing. The coho salmon are part of the Life Cycle Monitoring program operated by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Corvallis Research Lab. The project team counts the fish at the trap. The wild are allowed to pass, while the hatchery fish are counted, measured and killed so they do not mix.

That's where Campbell and the ragtag group that's become The Smiley Brothers came in. While the fish didn't show up as planned that first year, they did eventually come, and when they did, the group was ready with Plan B. They kept the salmon on ice in totes at the fish trap, then hauled the totes to the Tillamook Bay Boathouse cannery. There, owner Darius Penke processed the fish at cost — about \$1.50 a can — using cannery workers who might other-



JOSHUA LANDRY

Residents of a Nehalem care center enjoy fresh hatchery salmon caught in the same trap as the fish being canned as part of the Smiley Brothers project.

wise not have had jobs during this typically slow time of year.

They also recruited high school students to design the labels for the cans and to help deliver the fish. And somewhere in the midst of things, they went out raising money to pay for it all.

The first year they processed 157 salmon for 1,129 cans of fish. The next year the numbers rocketed with 700 salmon — 340 were from the hatchery upstream of the trap — for 7,500 cans of salmon.

By then they were getting the hang of things and feeling pretty good. But they still had no name. Then one eve-

How to help

The Smiley Brothers can always use more help, particularly during the two-month span when the salmon are running. To get involved or contribute, contact Bill Campbell at bcampbell@nehalemotel.net

ning while sitting around over a couple of beers, Ehlen recalls. "We were talking about what a great feeling this gives to all involved. Peggy Campbell suggested, 'You guys ought to just call yourselves the smiley brothers.' It's been The Smiley Brothers ever since."

By 2011, The Smiley Brothers were cooking. They took over the processing of the tuna from the Oregon Tuna Classic in Garibaldi and came up with 660 pounds of tuna for 12,704 cans.

They also expanded their delivery route, adding on the school backpack program, which sends food home with students who might not otherwise get enough to eat over the weekend, and two assisted living centers.

"It's a really big deal with our residents here," says Blanca Tarrieta, administrator at the Nehalem Bay House, a nonprofit center that caters

to low-income residents.

"Most are locals who have grown up in the Nehalem area and have been involved with fishing throughout the years. They can't wait for the cooks to cook it all up and just have a big, huge salmon dinner. Just knowing it was local salmon out of our local rivers makes a big difference to our residents."

This year, The Smiley Brothers are expecting to process 800 cans of salmon and 4,200 cans of tuna.

But it's more than just food, it's high-quality, premium nutrition, Ehlen says. "I know the food banks are very grateful. Good, quality protein is a tremendous commodity. It's probably one of the hardest things to keep stocked in a food bank."

And that's just one of the reasons he'd like to see the program not only expanded, but expanded.

"Perhaps it could be a branded product where the canneries buy the fish at a low cost and process 20 percent for food banks and sell an amount as an Oregon product," Ehlen says. "They could smoke them, can them and sell them and provide all kinds of jobs. It's so win-win."

Since 2011, The Smiley Brothers have joined forces with the North Tillamook County Rotary and Campbell has gone on something of a speaking tour, raising funds and encouraging others to consider a similar project. It's not a tough sell, Campbell says.

"One fellow said to me, 'How do you become a Smiley Brother?' I said, 'If you see someone who needs help and you can do that from the heart, you're going to feel good about it and you're probably a Smiley Brother.'"

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