



## Where Is Rio Rico, and Why Is This Important for Hunger Relief?

Rio Rico, Arizona, is an unincorporated community and census-designated place in Santa Cruz County, Arizona. It's only about 62 square miles and just about 60 miles away from Tucson, Arizona. It neighbors Nogales, Arizona's Port of Entry to Mexico, and is home to a heavy handful of produce distributors, which help supply the nation with fresh fruits and vegetables.

Rio Rico has been home to Arizona Food Bank Network's No Borders No Limits Produce Program (NBNL) since July 2022. This year, if all goes well, **the Rio Rico warehouse will become the first building that the AzFBN owns.** It now supports a staff of more than 20 full-time team members.

Purchasing a warehouse means we can renovate to accommodate a staff of this size and diversity and grow existing programming to move the needle even further when it comes to ending hunger. Plans for comprehensive waste management strategies and a job training program for soft and hard skills, like forklift driver training, are underway. Once scaled, these programs will be incredibly impactful not only for AzFBN, but also for Santa Cruz County and Arizona food systems.

"We are very thankful for all our donors because **this growth means less produce is going to waste and we can help people in our state by supplying them with healthy fresh produce.** NBNL also helps many families in our own community by creating and training them for full-time jobs," said Benjamin Rodriguez, Senior Produce Logistics Manager at AzFBN.

*(Continued Inside)*

### Our Members



COMMUNITY  
FOOD BANK  
OF SOUTHERN ARIZONA





At the end of 2023, 10 people working in the warehouse as temporary labor were hired as full-time AzFBN employees, and new positions were added for the sustainability of the program. The NBNL team cultivates relationships with produce distributors that donate fruits and vegetables, works together on the repack line to handpick only the best produce for food boxes, drives freight trucks full of food to food banks across the state and beyond, and so much more.

Walking into the warehouse is a full sensory experience. This work requires decisions made by every part of the brain.

Forklifts buzz by as they stage bulk produce bins. In the next room, a conveyor belt whirs, surrounded by quick, detail-driven hands sorting fruits and veggies into boxes, and reggaeton music keeps the beat with familiar chatter. Across the way, a group convenes to arrange the finer details of collaboration across the Southwest Produce Co-Op according to seasonality, impending regional storm cells, and available vehicles. Carefully, they ensure that logistics are efficient, keeping an eye on how long produce will last to ensure fresh food reaches the tables of food-insecure families.

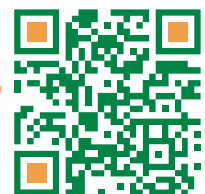
“Even on busy, stressful days, we try to have a good time ... with good spirits, even tough days go faster,” Benjamin said.

The smell some days is better than others, since the loads of produce donated are sometimes partially compromised — such as with bags of mini cucumbers that have a softer one in the mix, and flats with a handful of bruised apples — sort of like your fridge after you’ve gone on a trip for the weekend without emptying it. This is why we have a focus on waste management, especially for food waste. The more we build capacity, the better equipped we are to handle more compromised loads, which means we’re sending more perfectly good food to our food bank partners. As for the produce that’s not fresh enough for our neighbors, we’re exploring options ranging from farm feed to compost and everything in between.

Maintaining and building these programs where they are needed most will help ensure that businesses in the area have a place for excess that isn’t the landfill, and that struggling families across Arizona and beyond will get fresh fruits and veggies.

Rio Rico, Arizona — a great place for AzFBN to buy its first “home.”

Want to support NBNL?  
Scan this QR Code!



## Stewards of Land, Growers of Food

Kindness, passion, and sharing wealth are values that drive the farmers we spoke with who are currently participating in the Arizona Food Bank Network's Friends of The Farm, a farm-to-food bank program. Danielle is a farmer who is originally from California who has grown roots now in Skull Valley, Arizona, 20 miles west of Prescott. She's had her hands in the soil since she was 5 or 6 years old, learning everything from her dad in their backyard, from childhood neighbors, and from working in the community garden, which is where she learned to love greenhouses.

In 2012, Danielle moved to Arizona to continue consulting with farmers and teach people how to steward the land - two initiatives she was engaged in while living in California. When she's not on the farm, she spends time deeply embedded in the Yarnell community, where a devastating fire took several firefighters' lives in 2013. As the town rebuilds, Danielle is encouraged by seeing many small businesses opening, and the community center and food bank are gaining support.

In 2022, she found her current piece of land in Skull Valley, Arizona. It is a 5-acre property that's perfect for building geodesic dome greenhouses and teaching people how to grow their food.

"I have always had a passion for this; I have always wanted to feed people who need food. So, I started doing that, through this program," Danielle says.

Dionne Washington, who credits her grandfather for her passion, connects to the land in a similar way in sprawling metropolitan Phoenix. Through Project Roots and AZ Community Hub, she grows food, connects neighbors to resources, and supports emerging and long-time BIPOC growers much like herself.

**"It's just a bonus that this food is being grown by people who look like me, and I can give it to people who also look like me ... I'm growing things that are culturally appropriate and they remind people that look like me of home," Dionne explains.**

Dionne remembers picking up food boxes from St. Mary's Food Bank with her family while she was growing up, so the reciprocity she feels with the land and her neighbors is extra meaningful. She and Danielle are giving their fellow Arizona farmers a chance to dig deep, reap what they sow, and share what they can for future generations through Friends of The Farm at AzFBN.

Learn more about our Friends of The Farm farm-to-food bank program at [azfoodbanks.org/friends-of-the-farm](https://azfoodbanks.org/friends-of-the-farm).



## Hunger Relief License Plate

Have you seen this license plate when driving around Arizona, or do you even have one yourself? The Hunger Relief license plate costs \$25 (plus postage and handling) and benefits AzFBN. **Get yours when you renew your Arizona license plate** and help end hunger one "plate" at a time. A big thanks to everyone who has this special plate. See you on the road!



Arizona  
Food Bank  
Network

# Grove of Good

## monthly giving circle



Scan to give now or go to  
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### Contact Us

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Phoenix, Arizona 85004  
(602) 528-3434 : Local  
(800) 445-1914 : Toll-free  
(602) 528-3838 : Fax

## Grove of Good

You've probably heard the saying, "Many hands make light work." Well, many people helping end hunger make a Grove (of Good)!

**Making an automatic monthly gift to help food insecure families is one of the easiest and most cost-effective ways of supporting the vision of a hunger-free Arizona.** Now your monthly gifts mean even more because you'll be welcomed into an active community of people who care, called the Grove of Good.

By joining the Grove of Good community with a monthly gift, you will receive:

- **Special communications and gatherings** for our Grove of Good circle of donors
- **Opportunities for tours and insider views** of the work that ends hunger
- **Spaces to convene with other people who care** about the issue of food insecurity
- **A special Grove of Good gift** for anyone making a monthly gift of at least \$40 during 2024!

Thanks for gleaning goodness to help end hunger — by the Grove!

*With great data, we can do great things. Our new Impact Update will help you stay informed and agile in the fight against hunger, whether you're an AzFBN partner, advocate, or supporter. Together, we will end hunger for our neighbors across Arizona!*

**APRIL BRADHAM** AzFBN President & CEO



## INNOVATION

In 2023, AzFBN supported **58 schools with child nutrition programming**, including (but not limited to) connecting a school to a contracted caterer, providing ongoing support for a unique improvement, helping with child nutrition programming and grant applications, and everything in between.

This important work impacts approximately **25,576 students across 40 districts in 8 counties** across Arizona.



**Child Nutrition 101 Toolkit:** Debuted at the School Nutrition Association of AZ conference, this AzFBN-developed document helps charter and public school administrators take care of their students' nutrition.



Learn about the "can of beans" that started it all...



**Food Distributions for Indigenous, Spanish-speaking migrant farmworkers:** In collaboration with St. Mary's Food Bank and TONATIERRA, these special distributions are called Miltecayotl and occur on a monthly basis with 100-150 food boxes distributed each time.



Check out our conversation with local anti-hunger and farmworker advocate Chef Silvana Esparza!

## ADVOCACY



Thanks in part to AzFBN's Advocacy, **\$6.75 million was invested in healthy school meals at the state level to make an estimated 12 million school meals more accessible** to kids from low-income households, as well as reducing unpaid school meal debt in districts across the state.



AzFBN supported DES in establishing a new program to restore SNAP and TANF benefits stolen through EBT card skimming, cloning, or phishing. To date, it has **returned over \$1 million in stolen benefits to low-income Arizona families.**



**We advocated for veterans, people experiencing homelessness, and former foster youth to be exempt from heightened SNAP work requirements and led outreach when changes went into effect in October.**



The **2024 Anti-Hunger Playbook** is ready for the legislative session! This information can be handy for **ALL voters, especially in a presidential election year.**

# FOOD BANKING

In 2023, AzFBN supported **95 growers and producers across Arizona** to supply food banks with **\$1,727,332 worth of nutritious, local food** through the Friends of the Farm program.

The No Borders No Limits produce program provided and distributed **875,136 produce boxes to 5 regional Arizona food banks.**

### Our Members



Overall, through collaboration across the sector, AzFBN facilitated the distribution of **47,179,250 pounds of food to 39 food banks** between January 1, 2023-December 31, 2023.



AzFBN's Rio Rico leadership sees "Food as Love..." and it shows.



**Produce distributed to AZ food banks:**  
24,244,954 pounds



**Produce distributed to Southwest Produce Cooperative (SPC) food banks:**  
20,827,239 pounds



**Produce distributed to Feeding America food banks outside of Arizona and the SPC (as far as Indiana!):**  
2,107,250 pounds

The solutions to hunger are only accessible through collaboration and a system-wide approach. In 2023, food banks across Arizona **served 550,000 individuals on average each month!** That's up from about 450,000 before the COVID-19 pandemic. It is an honor for AzFBN to support the food banks and pantries which, in turn, serve our neighbors every day.

