

42,000 Pounds of Potatoes to Hurricane Victims

For hurricane victims, 42,000 pounds of potatoes sweeten holidays

The Courier: By LAURA McKNIGHT

HOUMA – One item not lacking in Terrebonne Parish is instant mashed potatoes. Billy Foster, Jr. said he didn't realize potatoes would be such a smash in Terrebonne until community groups began distributing 42,000 pounds of the popular tuber earlier this month. It's been a big hit," said Foster, president and owner of Terminix of Houma. Foster and fellow members of two Terrebonne Rotary clubs are coordinating the distribution of massive bags of potatoes along with 5,000 pounds of beans and 5,000 pounds of rice throughout the parish and other hurricane-hit areas.

Efforts to give out the huge amounts of food have involved members of the Rotary Club of Houma and the Houma-Terrebonne Rotary Club, along with community groups of nearly every kind -- churches, ministries, civic organizations, senior centers, food banks, a fire department, community centers, a homeless shelter, police and others. Thousands of pounds of food have been spread among hurricane victims, the elderly and others in need. "It has really been a community-wide effort, one that Rotary is proud to have sponsored," Foster said.

Bayou residents still struggling with storm damage eagerly scooped up the food last weekend, said Michael Hebert, a member of the St. Eloi Knights of Columbus Council 8779 in Theriot. Between Friday and Monday, the group gave out 4,000 pounds of potatoes along Bayou Dularge, Foster said. "They were just ecstatic," Hebert said.

With attention focused on New Orleans recovery, south Terrebonne residents devastated by Hurricane Rita have been largely ignored, Hebert said. "The bayous have suffered just phenomenal damage," he said. "It was just overwhelming and exciting and thankful that someone thought of us." Following Hurricane Rita, Foster called his friend J.B. Roberts, a Texan who runs Hunger Plus, an organization that distributes food in foreign countries. This time, the agency agreed to ship food closer to home, to hurricane victims in Terrebonne. The shipments arrived early this month. "We know it cost them money. We thank them dearly," said Hebert.

Foster said he had the shipment of rice and beans dropped off at the Rotary Club of Houma's annual barbecue, where about 30 members formed a human chain to unload cases, each filled with six five-pound bags. Rotarians delivered thousands of pounds of the food to various community groups for distribution. Next, Hunger Plus sent an 18-wheeler filled with instant mashed potatoes to Buquet Distributing Co. in Houma, where employees unloaded thousand-pound sacks of potatoes. "It's like those sand bags dropped on (levee) breaches," said Foster. Buquet Distributing, which includes several Rotarian workers, stored the potatoes until they could be handed out. The food has been widely dispersed, helping not only Terrebonne flood victims, but hurricane victims through much of southeast Louisiana. The Baton Rouge Food Bank, which serves 12 parishes, took 16,000 pounds of potatoes to give out, and staff with the Plaquemines Parish School Board picked up about 3,000 pounds of potatoes Friday. Rotarians have given thousands of pounds of rice, beans and potatoes to community and civic organizations in Terrebonne and Lafourche for distribution.

"I think there's just a need out there," Foster said, referring to south Terrebonne. "These people were really, really put out. I'm not sure if people in Houma realize that." It takes more than a couple months to recover from a disaster of that magnitude, said Foster. "I'm not sure you ever do," Foster said. Once emergency relief organizations depart, those impacted by Hurricane Rita still need community help. "I think that's what's happening," Foster said. "I just find that there's a lot of appreciation out there."