

Morongo Band donates 6,000 turkeys

GIVING: Knowing what it's like to do without, the tribe provides food to charities.

By SARA FEASTER / The Press-Enterprise

MORONGO RESERVATION - Using conference tables as a makeshift assembly line, Yvonne Silvas moved quickly and efficiently Monday as she boxed, sorted and stacked the turkey donations set for regional charities.



Greg Vojtko / The Press-Enterprise
Riverside County firefighters, from left, David Butler and Mike Hudson, along with engineer Bill Smith, right, repackage turkeys at the Morongo Community Center.

Clad in a maroon T-shirt reading "Morongo Band of Mission Indians, from our family to yours," Silvas said this was the first year she volunteered for the tribe's annual turkey donation. She joined her sister Virginia Lyons.

"She came out last year," said Silvas, who is from San Jacinto. "I thought it would be important for me to come and help out too."

Silvas was one of dozens of people who volunteered to help package the turkeys, which will be delivered throughout the week to charities in the Inland area and Los Angeles County, said Elaine Mathews, tribal vice chair.

Doubling last year's donations, the Morongo tribe is donating 6,000 turkeys, Mathews said.

The turkeys will go to 43 charities and provide an estimated 30,000 people with Thanksgiving meals who otherwise would have gone without, according to tribal officials.

In the spirit of the season, the tribe will also honor local firefighters who braved last year's wildfires with daily turkey lunches and will invite them to aid in the preparation of turkeys for delivery.

Cabazon Elementary Secretary Dana Smith said the school will receive about 200 turkeys this week. She said parents are grateful for the tribe's donations.

Ken Cook and his wife, Valerie, who live on the reservation six months of the year, are volunteering for the second time. Ken Cook, whose father grew up on the reservation, is glad to see people are getting help.



Volunteer Suzy Erickson and Sal Araujo, Morongo tribal law enforcement officer, repackage turkeys to be donated to 43 area charities.

"Morongo needs to be a force here in the community; it's good to see a reach from Morongo to the community." Morongo members have been donating turkeys to charities for about 20 years, Mathews said.

It was not always possible. Before gaming, there was a high rate of welfare dependency on the reservation, with unemployment as high as 90 percent, tribal officials said. The tribe is now the largest employer in the Pass area, with almost 2,000 employees, and it donates to more than 45 community groups annually, tribal documents show.

"We've been there. We know what it's like to go without," Mathews said. "We've been very blessed with gaming ... We'd like to share, try to make a difference."

Because of the large number of turkeys donated, the tribe is reaching to areas as far as Los Angeles and Riverside. In the past, it has donated blankets and shoes to migrant families in Mecca as well as paying their rent during the holidays.