Healthy Eating at Farmers Markets
The Impact of Nutrition Incentive Programs

Program Partners
Forest Grove Farmers Market
Hillsboro Farmers Market
Hollywood Farmers Market
Lents International Farmers Market
Moreland Farmers Market
Oregon Health & Science University Farmers Market
Portland Farmers Market

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Introduction

A diet rich in fruits and vegetables may help prevent the development of chronic diseases such as type II diabetes, overweight and obesity, and cardiovascular disease\(^1\). Unfortunately, healthy food options are not available across all communities. Many communities lack adequate access to healthy food. People in those communities may find it difficult to maintain a healthy diet because existing healthy options are either too expensive, the quality is poor, or they are not culturally desirable\(^2\). Fast food restaurants are also likely to offer a minimal selection of healthy and nutritious items. These conditions make it challenging for some communities to access healthy food on a regular basis and maintain a healthy diet\(^3\). In many instances, farmers markets are a viable option to improve access to healthy food in communities where either no traditional food retail exists or available options are poor. Farmers markets often provide an array of seasonal, fresh produce, and space for community gatherings and events.

Across the country, farmers markets continue to thrive. Over the past several years, the number of farmers markets has increased by more than 80% in the United States\(^4\). Many markets are equipped to handle SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits by providing Electronic Benefit Transfer technology to SNAP customers; however, many community residents are unaware that markets accept SNAP and therefore do not experience the many benefits markets offer. To advertise that farmers markets accept SNAP benefits and incentivize SNAP participants to visit markets, many farmers markets in the Portland Metropolitan Area have begun offering Nutrition Incentive Programs to SNAP customers.

Nutrition Incentive Programs

Nutrition Incentive Programs are gaining popularity in farmers markets across the nation. These programs seek to introduce a SNAP customer to farmers markets by offering a dollar-to-dollar match on SNAP benefits (and in some instances, WIC and Senior FDNP and SSI benefits\(^a\)) up to a specified amount. For example, if a market offers a five dollar match incentive and a customer buys two dollars of produce with federal SNAP benefit dollars, the market will provide an additional two dollars to use at the market at no cost. The market will continue to match dollars spent up to five dollars. It is estimated that more than 300 farmers markets currently participate in these programs\(^5\). These programs have proven to be successful in helping SNAP customers afford more fruits and vegetables and retaining SNAP customers at farmers markets throughout the season\(^6\). In addition to helping families eat healthier, Nutrition Incentive Programs also help spur the local economy, address food insecurity, and build social capital.

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\(^a\)Women, Infants, and Children and Senior Farm Direct Nutrition Programs and Social Security Income.
Impact of Nutrition Incentive Programs

Oregon Public Health Institute (OPHI) has a history of working with SNAP and farmers market partners to improve access to healthy food among low income Oregonians. OPHI began its work with farmers markets five years ago with the Lents International Farmers Market (LIFM). Beginning in 2008, LIFM was the first market to offer nutrition incentives to SNAP customers through their “Healthy Rewards” program. Following a national movement, more than 10 farmers markets in the Portland Metro Area now offer Nutrition Incentive Programs. Many of these programs are funded by New Seasons Market Pacific Village Grant program and neighborhood businesses. In 2010, with funding from the Kaiser Community Fund at the Northwest Health Foundation, OPHI convened a partnership of farmers markets offering these programs. To evaluate the impact of the Nutrition Incentive Programs at selected markets, OPHI and farmers market partners collected more than 250 surveys from SNAP customers during the 2010 market season. All SNAP customers who approached the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) table prior to shopping were asked to complete the survey. 100% of SNAP customers who approached the EBT table participated in the Nutrition Incentive Program on the day the survey was administrated at each market; however, only a few SNAP customers completed the survey (Figure 1). Because of the low response rate to the survey, the results cannot be generalized to all SNAP customers who shop at Farmers Markets.

The following is a summary of the findings.
Nearly 30 percent of SNAP customers were families.

Many families, seniors, and adults shopped at markets during the 2010 season (Figure 2) representing a variety of nationalities and languages. Many (44%) SNAP customers were single or double adult households. The average age of SNAP customers was 36 years old.

![Languages Spoken at Home](image)

*Families indicate households with children. In some cases, seniors were living in households with children so the numbers in the above figure will not add to the survey sample of 261. Eleven people did not disclose their household make up.*

Most SNAP customers were infrequent or new customers.

About half of the SNAP customers in this study visited their market infrequently, shopping at the market 1/3 of available market days or less. Approximately one-third of SNAP customers frequently visited the market while 14% of those surveyed were shopping at the market for the first time this season. The Nutrition Incentive Program has the potential to increase the frequency of visits among new and infrequent customers and, in turn, increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, vendor sales, and SNAP redemptions.
SNAP related spending more than doubled between 2009 – 2010.

Between 2009 and 2010, SNAP sales at the markets climbed from $52,896 to $95,027 – an 80% increase. The additional $41,241 in matched dollars made possible through the market-based Nutrition Incentive Programs raised the total dollar value of SNAP-related purchases to $136,268 in 2010, two and a half times more than in 2009. Further, individual markets experienced noticeable increases in the number of overall SNAP transactions. For example, the number of SNAP transactions at King Farmers Market increased 178% between 2009 and 2010 (from 1032 to 2865), and at Buckman Farmers Market, SNAP transactions increased by 148% (from 526 to 1307).

More than half of SNAP customers reported eating a lot more fruits and vegetables as a result of Nutrition Incentive Programs.

It is generally accepted that increased consumption of fruits and vegetables is connected to improved nutrition and reduced risk of obesity and chronic disease. Communities that have access to a variety of healthy food options typically consume more fruits and vegetables, experience better health outcomes, and maintain an improved quality of life7. Access to healthy food, then, is an issue of public health. More than 70% of those surveyed reported eating at least a little more fruits and vegetables as a result of the Nutrition Incentive Programs at the farmers market where they shop. In fact, more than half report that they are eating a lot more fruits and vegetables because of the program.

Research shows that healthy eating habits start early – that children’s food preferences are closely associated with what is familiar and through eating patterns that are modeled by parents and caretakers8. Of the 72 respondents with children living in their household, more than 80% are eating at least a little more fruits and vegetables because of the incentive program. Older generations also report an increased consumption of fruits and vegetables as a result of the Nutrition Incentive Programs: 12 of the 16 Seniors said they are eating at least a little more fruits and vegetables.

Figure 4: SNAP Sales (2009 – 2010)

Figure 5: Fruit and Vegetable Consumption of SNAP Customers
SNAP families plan to spend more per household than SNAP adults and seniors

On the day that they were surveyed, the majority of SNAP customers planned to spend between $5 and $20. SNAP families planned to spend between $5 and $10 more than SNAP adults and seniors. More than one-quarter of respondents planned to spend $21 to $30. Seven of the 16 seniors said they planned to spend between $5 and $10 at the market the day that they were surveyed while another seven planned to spend at least $11.

![Figure 6: Planned SNAP Spending at Markets (Adults and Seniors)](image)

![Figure 7: Planned SNAP Spending at Markets (Families)](image)

Nearly half of SNAP customers would stop shopping as frequently if the Nutrition Incentive Program ended.

Nearly all survey respondents responded that they will continue to shop at the market if the Nutrition Incentive Program ends (Figure 8); however, many would shop less frequently. Without the Nutrition Incentive Program, SNAP customers may purchase fewer fruits and vegetables, thus negating the gains the programs has had on fruit and vegetable consumption.

“The Fresh Funds really help to stretch my EBT dollars through the entire month and I use it every week.”

![Figure 8: Expected SNAP Customer Patronage if Nutrition Incentive Program Ends](image)
Some SNAP customers will no longer shop at farmers markets.

Six percent (16 respondents) are at risk of losing access to healthy food if the nutrition incentive programs disappear as they reported that they will no longer shop at farmers markets if the program ends. All 16 respondents are infrequent market customers and three were surveyed on their first trip to the market that season. The “average” respondent in this group is a 31-year old customer from a two-adult household with no children. There are, however, households with children represented in this group. Overall, eleven of the sixteen respondents are eating at least a little more fruits and vegetables as a result of the incentive program, and nearly all expected to spend at least $5 at the market the day they took the survey.

Nutrition Incentive Programs help SNAP customers eat healthier and support farmers.

SNAP customers were overwhelmingly satisfied with the Nutrition Incentive Programs, demonstrating appreciation for their existence in addition to frequently commenting how helpful the match programs are for increasing access to local, fresh, healthy and/or organic foods. One SNAP customer shared, “Great program! We really buy more fruits and vegetables that we couldn’t afford otherwise.”

Furthermore, customers repeatedly explained how the programs have helped reduce food costs and stretched budgets, and that the incentive programs change behavior by providing motivation to get to the market, encouraging market purchases, and supporting healthier eating habits. One SNAP customer remarked, “Foodshare Fund has been a huge help with my grocery budget and also my health. I’ve been eating more fruits and veggies and feeling great!”

“I enjoy this program. Having the extra $5-10 when being on a budget helps to get my son and I healthy foods while supporting the local farmers and vendors!”

“This is an amazing program. It encourages me to eat healthy when I don’t feel like I don’t have the money to choose healthy alternatives. I hope the program continues.”
Summary

Based on the findings from this evaluation and conversations with market leaders, Nutrition Incentive Programs are clearly valued by SNAP customers and provide many social and economic benefits. The future of these programs, however, remains unclear. Most programs are funded privately, and markets are concerned about their operational capacity to manage and implement these important programs. While this evaluation gives us some insight into the nutritional and economic impact of these programs on SNAP customers, further study is needed to determine how these programs impact vendors and markets’ administrative capacity. Some markets would find it beneficial to streamline these programs across markets to make it easier for SNAP customers who shop at multiple markets and to reduce the administrative oversight. Nonetheless, this evaluation is the first step towards finding common themes among SNAP customers who participated in the 2010 Nutrition Incentive Program evaluation at participating farmers markets in the Portland Metropolitan Area.

(Endnotes)
1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Dietary Guidelines, 2011.
3 Ibid.
4 PolicyLink. Healthy Food, Healthy Communities: Improving Access and Opportunities Through Food Retailing. Fall 2005.
5 Wholesome Wave Foundation, 2011.
7 Healthy Food, Healthy Communities. Promoting Strategies to Improve Access to Fresh, Healthy Food and Transform Communities. PolicyLink, 2011.