

# Barriers to Using Urban Farmers' Market: An Investigation of Food Stamp Clients' Perception



Oregon Food Bank

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the challenges farmers' markets face in attracting and retaining food stamp customers. Farmers' markets around the country have invested in technology and programs to accept electronic food stamps (EBT). Many of those markets are struggling to build a base of food stamp clients. We used Portland, Oregon as a case study to examine food stamp clients' perceptions of farmers' markets and grocery shopping habits. According to findings, farmers' market organizers face both negative perceptions and operational realities: higher prices, inconvenient hours, complex shopping experiences, and limited discount opportunities. The WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) appeared effective at motivating respondents to shop at markets. The FMNP may prove an effective model for using food stamp subsidies to encourage produce consumption and market use among low-income populations.<sup>1</sup>

**Purpose of the Study**

During the summer of 2005, New Territories Research partnered with Oregon Food Bank and Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) on a study to investigate food stamp clients' perceptions of farmers' markets in Portland, Oregon. Findings were meant to help market organizers, local government agencies, and community health groups promote improved access

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to local foods for food stamp clients through newly established electronic benefits transfer (EBT) programs at farmers' markets.

### **About Farmers Markets**

Farmers markets are recurrent markets at fixed locations where farmers sell their agricultural products. Markets promote mostly fresh foods such as fruits, vegetables, meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products. Produce tends to be the dominant product group at markets, especially during the height of a region's growing season. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimated that in the year 2000, Americans spent more than \$888 million at farmers' markets, a fraction of the roughly \$800 billion spent on total food and beverage purchases.<sup>i ii</sup>

Although the role of farmers' markets within the food system is small, markets represent a lifeline to some small farms operators. They are especially important in light of the decline of small farms in the United States. In 1900 the USDA counted 5.7 million distinct farms. From 1950 to 1974 that number plummeted from 5.4 to 2.3 million, falling still more to 1.9 million in 1997.<sup>iii</sup>

The number of farmers' markets across the country has grown dramatically in the past thirty years.<sup>iv</sup> In just 10 years, from 1994 to 2004, the number of markets more than doubled from 1,755 to 3,706.<sup>v</sup> Farmers use farmers' markets because wholesale market channels are either less financially viable or closed to them due to their small size.

At farmers' markets, farmers receive the full retail price for their products versus the USDA estimate of 19 to 20 cents on a dollar spent on produce at grocery stores.<sup>vi</sup>

Farmers, not market organizers, set prices using a variety of strategies including comparison to grocery store prices, pricing competitively against competing market vendors, and adding a premium to their costs of production.

### **Farmers' Markets and USDA Food Assistance**

The USDA launched the Community Food Security Initiative in February 1999 in support of the 1996 Congressional passage of the Community Food Security Act. The objective is to "forge partnerships between the USDA and local communities to build local food systems, decrease need, and improve nutrition."<sup>vii</sup> In support of these goals, in 2002, funding for two federal programs focused directly on increasing the use of farmers' markets by low-income populations increased by \$20 million.<sup>viii</sup> These programs are the Woman, Infants, and Children (WIC) Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) and the Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP).

The FMNP was established in 1992 to encourage participants in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to include more fresh fruits and vegetables in their diets and to shop more frequently at farmers' markets. The federal benefit under the WIC FMNP ranges from \$10 to \$20 per recipient per year, based on a state's discretion. These benefits are provided via \$2 vouchers. State agencies may supplement the benefit level with matching funds. The SFMNP program provides \$2 vouchers to low-income citizens over 60 years of age. For both programs, vouchers can be used to purchase fruits,

vegetables, and edible plant starts directly from farmers at farmers' markets, road-side farm stands, and through community supported agriculture (CSA) programs.<sup>ix</sup>

During the same period in which funding for farmers' market subsidy programs was growing, many food stamp clients were being cut off from markets. When food stamps were a paper form of currency, farmers selling at farmers' markets or farm stands could accept them directly. Welfare reform under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 required all states transition from paper to Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) food stamp programs before October of 2002.<sup>x</sup> Because most farmers' markets did not have the necessary infrastructure, such as telephone lines and electricity, to implement the same type of EBT system found at a permanent retail location, they were cut off from the food stamp program. Between 1994 and 1998, food stamp redemptions at farmers' markets dropped sharply from \$6.4 million to \$3.8 million. In 1998, the latest year for which data are available, farmers markets accounted for just 0.02 percent of food stamps spent nationally.<sup>xi</sup>

In 1998, the Hilo Farmers' Market in Hawaii was the first to set up a central farmers' market EBT system to facilitate food stamp transactions. The market's food stamp purchases had fallen 98% prior to installing an EBT system. After the system was up and running, Hilo's food stamp revenue rebounded to within 50% of pre-EBT food stamp purchases.<sup>xii</sup>

More recently, farmers' market organizations throughout the country have been launching EBT programs in order to reconnect food stamp clients to fresh local foods and direct a portion of the estimated \$28.6 billion food stamps spent each year to small farms.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Portland Farmers' Markets and EBT**

In the Portland-area, there are 32 markets located within Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas counties.<sup>xiv</sup> Most of these farmers' markets operate as non-profit entities. These 32 markets provide a direct sales outlet to over 550 Oregon and Southwest Washington vendors, most with operations within a 60-mile radius of Portland's center.<sup>xv</sup> All Portland's farmers' markets are located in mixed income neighborhoods and participate in the USDA's FMNP and SFMNP programs.

Portland has a high concentration of farmers markets, ranking number three on SustainLane's 2005 list of top five market cities in the US, after Santa Monica and Berkeley, California. Rankings are based on number of farmers' markets per capita.<sup>xvi</sup> Portland is the largest city in Oregon, one of the only states to see an increase in farms over the last 20 years. Agriculture and related food processing activities represent 10% of the gross state product, second only to the high tech sector.<sup>xvii</sup> Oregon's fastest growing agricultural segment is small farms cultivating less than 50 acres.<sup>xviii</sup> Farms of this size are likely to participate in farmers markets.

Portland is home to 15% of Oregonians and receives 22% of the state's food stamp benefits.<sup>xix</sup> Oregon consistently ranks among the top 10 states with the highest rate of hunger in the nation.<sup>xx</sup>

2004 marked the first pilot program to accept electronic food stamps (EBT) at a farmers' market in Portland. The pilot occurred at Eastbank Farmers' Market, a small 30-vendor market in a predominantly middle to low-income neighborhood. As of February 2004, according to the

Department of Human Services, 5317 persons received food stamps within the immediate neighborhoods served by Eastbank.<sup>xxi</sup> However, over the season's 17 market days, the total food stamp dollars spent onsite was only \$2,300, an average of just \$135 per week.<sup>xxii</sup>

By the 2005 season, five markets in Portland accepted EBT. At Portland Farmers' Market's Saturday market, the largest in the city, attracting as many as 10,000 people a market day, the highest amount of EBT transactions during the season represented only \$614, while one week was as low as \$47.<sup>xxiii</sup> Unlike Hawaii's Hilo Farmers' Market, Portland's markets did not have a solid base of food stamp clients prior to establishing EBT programs. Most markets were founded during or after food stamps' transition from paper to EBT.

In 1999, the Community Food Security Coalition published, *Hot Peppers and Parking Lot Peaches*. This research project was an effort to understand how to launch and operate successful farmers markets in low-income communities. The report concludes that low-income markets generally need to be subsidized and provides the USDA's FMNP and the patronage of middle-income consumers as examples of subsidies that are successful.<sup>xxiv</sup> Our Portland research adds to this work by exploring barriers to serving low-income residents via an existing network of farmers' markets serving mixed income communities.

## Method

Researchers interviewed 108 food stamp clients over July and August of 2005. The survey tool was comprised of four topic areas: Farmers' Market Awareness and Experience, Mealtime Routines, Grocery Shopping Habits, and Advice for Farmers' Market Organizers. It included 14 closed demographic questions and 17 discussion questions. Interviews took place at four DHS offices in Central Portland.<sup>2</sup> Offices were chosen based on their close proximity to farmers' markets. In August of 2005, participating DHS offices served over 13,500 households.<sup>xxv</sup> Participants were either self-selected, volunteering in response to announcements at DHS offices or approached while seated in DHS waiting rooms. Participants were screened by zip code and their status as food stamp clients.

## Demographics

Of the 108 participants, eighty (74%) were female. Family households represented two thirds of the sample, split almost evenly between single parents and couples. More than half of the family households had children under the age of three.

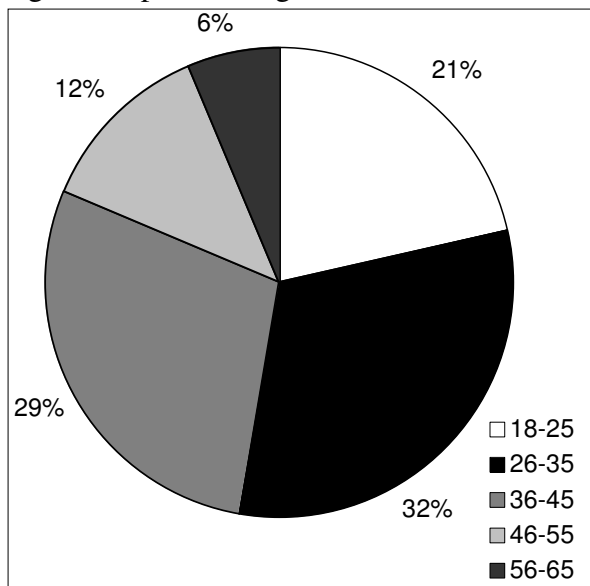
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<sup>2</sup> Participating Multnomah County DHS offices include the Albina, Northeast Self Sufficiency, Portland/New Market Theatre, and Southeast Portland branches.

Fig. 1: Family Demographics

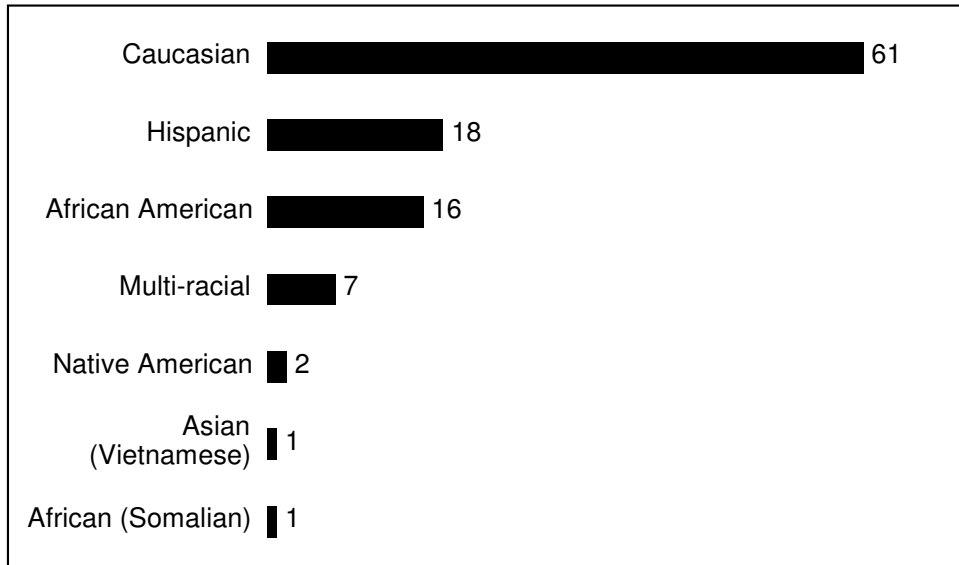
Total families	70
Single parents	38
Households with children 3 years of age or younger	38
Households with children 10 years of age or younger	51
Households with teenagers	27
Participants in WIC	25

Fig. 2: Respondent Age



Study participants represented a range of ages. None were younger than 18 or older than 65 years of age. The ethnicity of the sample aligned with the broader Portland demographics and reflected the neighborhoods served by participating DHS offices.

Figure 3: Respondent Ethnicity



The interview guide included open-ended questions about grocery budgets, the role food stamps play within those budgets, and use of community food resources. Seventy-two (67%) respondents described food stamps as their primary or only grocery funds. The average food stamp allocation in Oregon in 2004 was \$84 per person per month.<sup>xxvi</sup> Most participants described running out of food stamps during the third week of the month, a finding consistent with prior research conducted by the Oregon Food Bank.<sup>xxvii</sup> Findings include input from 10 (9%) respondents who described themselves as homeless, living in transitional housing, relying primarily on soup kitchens and donated foods, or depending on spare change to purchase very small amounts of food when possible. Only four (4%) respondents described themselves as able to purchase the foods they prefer without considering price.

**Food Stamp Clients and Portland Markets: Barriers to Use**

Most (97/90%) respondents did not buy food from farmers' markets on a regular basis. Forty-six (43%) participants had shopped markets over the 2005 season, but only 11 (10%) were regular market shoppers. Fifty (46%) had never been to a Portland-area farmers market and 36 (33%) had never shopped a farmers market anywhere.

Fig. 4: Farmers' Market Experience

Regular shoppers (use Portland markets at least once per month)	11 (10%)
Occasional shoppers (shopped at a Portland market more than once)	46 (43%)
Never shopped at a Portland markets	50 (46%)
Never shopped at a farmers market	36 (33%)

\*One respondent did not answer this question.

### *Awareness*

Although 29 (27%) study participants were aware they could use Oregon Trail, the state's EBT card, at area farmers' markets, most indicated that they had recently learned while being informed of our research project by DHS case workers. At the time of the study, EBT programs at local markets were new and promotions had been limited. Respondents suggested that the best avenues for promoting food resources to low-income shoppers would be local DHS offices, DHS food stamp mailings, grocery store circulars, newspapers, advertisements on public transportation, and community boards within large apartment buildings, in that order.

### *Price*

When asked what they dislike about farmers' markets and what might influence them to use markets regularly, 24 (22%) participants discussed price. They described farmers' markets as too expensive for their budgets and at the very least, more expensive than traditional grocery options. A few respondents perceived markets as selling mostly organic produce and perceived organic produce as expensive. Of the 24, 14 had shopped at a farmers' market in Portland, indicating that perceptions of local markets as expensive are influenced by factors beyond personal experience. Low prices also emerged as the top reason for preferring a particular grocery store. Other store attributes such as convenience, quality, and variety were secondary.

“Markets offer higher quality produce than grocery stores, but prices are unreasonable.”

“Farmers markets are for rich people. Markets need to change their organic stress to ‘fresh from the farm, top of the line local food is good for you.’”

“The best prices are at Super Wal-Mart in Vancouver. If I could afford petrol (gasoline), I would shop there. It is so cheap and worth the drive.”

As of our study, there had been no comprehensive research comparing seasonal produce prices at Portland's farmers' markets to those at the most popular grocery stores among respondents: Safeway (34/31%), WinCo (27/25%), and Fred Meyer (17/16%).

### *Convenience*

#### **Physical Access**

Twenty-three (21%) respondents cited limited hours and locations as barriers to using markets. At the time of the study, there were 9 markets across all neighborhoods served by participating DHS offices. Each market location operated one day per week within a set 4-6 hour window.

Fig. 5: Portland Farmers' Market Schedule

Market	Day	Hours
Alberta Co-op Farmers' Market	Saturday	10:00 AM – 2:00 PM
Hollywood Farmers Market	Saturday	8:00 AM – 1:00 PM
Portland Farmers Market	Saturday	8:30 AM – 2:00 PM
Hillsdale Farmers Market	Sunday	10:00 AM – 2:00 PM
Interstate Farmers Market	Wednesday	3:00 PM – 7:00 PM
Peoples' Co-op Farmers Market	Wednesday	2:00 PM – 7:00 PM
Portland Farmers Market	Wednesday	10:00 AM – 2:00 PM
Eastbank Farmers' Market	Thursday	3:30 PM – 7:30 PM
Portland Farmers Market	Thursday	4:00 PM – 8:00 PM

“They (farmers' markets) should be more days and more convenient. They are tough to fit into a schedule. Once a week isn't enough.”

There are no farmers' markets open in Portland on Mondays, Tuesdays, or Fridays. Few participants described set routines for shopping. The limited schedules of farmers' markets impose a burden of planning upon consumers. When asked what days or times they preferred to food shop, respondents' preferences varied widely, relating to work schedules or the desire to avoid store crowds and road traffic. Note that markets are motivated to operate during high traffic times such as rush hour during the week or after church on Sunday, to attract the necessary volume of walk-by or drive by traffic.

Among respondents, convenience followed price as the top motivator for choosing a grocery store. Convenience meant a number of things to respondents: closer to home, 24-hour access, one stop shop, or close to public transportation. More than half of the group walked, cycled, or used public transportation to get to the grocery store.

“I shop at Safeway on MLK because it is nearby, less than a mile from my home. If I have a car, I drive over to the Super Wal-Mart in Vancouver. They have good discounts on lots of foods.”

All Portland's center-city farmers' markets are in close proximity to bus routes. Some have light-rail access, are located on city-marked bike routes with bike parking, and all are in safe, walk-able areas.

### **Selection of Foods**

Fifteen (14%) respondents, all with local farmers' market experience, were challenged by the variety and availability of products sold at farmers' markets. Most respondents did not shop seasonally and valued purchasing the foods they like year-round.

“I don't use markets, because I don't like not finding what I want.”

Vegetables, then fruits, make up the largest product groups available at Portland's markets. Respondents were asked what vegetables and fruits they purchased most often. Apples, bananas, greens (lettuces, mustard greens, kale, and turnip greens), tomatoes, and corn were mentioned most frequently. All but bananas are grown locally in Oregon and available at markets during their respective seasons.

Study participants reported consuming very little fresh produce. Eighty-seven (81%) claimed to consume three or fewer servings of fruits or vegetables daily in any form, canned, frozen, as juice, or fresh. Most described eating produce that was purchased fresh one or fewer times on a given day.

Sixty participants were asked what would motivate them to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables. Thirty-eight out of 60 responded with comments related to lower prices or more disposable income to spend on groceries. Respondents within this group tended to express a strong desire to eat more fresh foods and frustration with their financial limitations.

“We have juice at breakfast. We eat a fruit or vegetable three or four times a week. We would eat more if we had more money.”

It is estimated that seventy-seven percent of Americans do not consume the USDA's recommended five servings of produce per day.<sup>xxviii</sup> Low-income populations consume the least produce.<sup>xxix</sup> Low-income people face many of the same produce consumption barriers faced by middle-income individuals such as lack of time and cooking skills. However, other barriers such as price considerations are more extreme for low-income shoppers.<sup>xxx</sup>

Some respondents specifically described eating too few fresh vegetables because they are inconvenient. Inconvenience included a number of conditions such as requiring too much storage space, spoiling too quickly, or taking too much time to prepare. A few participants perceived themselves as lacking time and skills to cook fresh produce. As with price, access to adequate storage space and spoilage risks may be greater deterrents for low-income shoppers. These findings align with those from *Why Americans Eat What They Eat* by concluding people who eat few fruits and vegetables do so because they are inconvenient compared to other food options.<sup>xxxi</sup>

“Vegetables are harder for me. I am always stocking up on fruit. We have fruit for breakfast every day and sometimes veggies at dinner. Vegetables take more prep and they don't seem to last as long.”

A recent study by Oklahoma Cooperative Extension showed fruit and vegetable cooking classes to be effective in increasing produce intake.<sup>xxxii</sup> A number of farmers' markets regularly provide tips for preparing and preserving produce. At present, there is no research available on how well these classes meet the needs of low-income shoppers.

Most respondents stated they were more likely to purchase fruit in the fresh state, while vegetable purchases were likely to be frozen or canned. Those consuming more produce cited the health of their children, personal health, pregnancy, and eating traditions as motivations. Children's health was far and away the most significant motivator for prioritizing fruits and vegetables. Parents stressed that their children's preferences motivated grocery purchases.

"Now that I have kids, I eat more fruits than I used to and vegetables. I stay away from fast food. I try to put well-rounded meals on the table..."

Single moms and participants without children were more likely to describe habits based on packaged or prepared foods. Many parents in this group described the need for easily prepared inexpensive one-dish meals such as mac 'n cheese, pot pies, and TV dinners.

"I might boil and mash vegetables for the baby because it is more nutritious than buying jarred food. I eat meat, veggies, and rice, but I'm in school full-time, so more often I'll toss a pot pie in the oven for myself."

A number of respondents associated fruits and vegetables, especially fresh produce, with a healthy diet. As promoters of fresh local fruits and vegetables, some respondents expected farmers' markets to provide information about the health benefits of the foods they offer.

"I expect people to know more about health than me at these places [farmers' markets]."

None of the eight (7%) study participants who claimed to consume five or more portions of fruits and vegetables per day shopped farmers' markets regularly. Four of the eight were immigrants, citing ethnic traditions as the reason for incorporating more produce into their diets. This group tended to budget more time for grocery shopping trips in order to bargain shop among multiple grocery sources. Some mentioned produce stands as the most economical source for a good variety of quality fruits and vegetables. These specialty fruit and vegetable outlets are often open-air, and commonly confused with farmers' markets. Produce stands are not limited to locally grown items. Likewise, these respondents did not prioritize locally grown as a product attribute.

"I buy where the sales are, the grocery store or produce stand. I will go out of my way to buy produce at a stand because the quality is better."

In this sample there were several graduate students who were both higher than average produce consumers and likely to shop farmers' markets. Although this aligns with research that ties produce consumption to education, note that this segment also did not express the severe financial constraints described by many respondents.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

### **Usability**

Ten (9%) respondents described farmers' markets as more difficult to use than grocery stores, citing crowds, the effort required to comparison-shop between multiple growers, and long lines as market weaknesses. For three recent immigrants, language barriers added to the complexity of using markets. All ten had used a local farmers' market.

“The growers should let people know what they are out of so we don't wait in line in a crowd. I am not browsing at the market. I do not have time to wait. I'm looking for specific things and want to see a sign that lists all the products and the prices.”

Twenty (19%) respondents suggested market organizations provide more information about how to use Portland's farmers' markets. Ideas included educating shoppers about what fruits and vegetables are in season, times and locations of all area markets, tips on how to bargain shop, and common questions to ask growers.

### **Reaching the “Value” Shopper**

A final criticism of farmers' markets was a lack of clear product promotions. Nine (8%) respondents suggested farmers' markets would benefit from traditional marketing tools such as coupons, discount cards, or promotional pricing common to grocery store produce departments, e.g. 4 for \$1.

“There should be more information on the better values. What is in season? What needs to be sold soon? Things like over-ripe tomatoes for sauce, how are the growers pushing these items?”

“Don't try to get every last dollar from Oregon Trail (food stamp) clients. Offer deals. Let people know what the growers are trying to get rid of.”

Fifty-three (49%) respondents discussed the role of promotions in determining grocery purchases. Very few mentioned using a grocery list. Respondents were more likely to describe purchasing a routine short list of staples by memory and basing the majority of grocery purchases on available coupons and in-store specials. Thirty-four of these 53 “value shoppers” were parents.

When asked how they stretch their food dollars, respondents mentioned bulk purchases, higher calorie-per-dollar protein items such as canned tuna and peanut butter and a number of inexpensive, long shelf-life foods like pasta, rice, ramen, dried beans, and frozen dinners. It is important to note that manufacturer promotions, by their nature, favor packaged foods.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

“I use in-house circulars from WinCo. I go to marked-down items first and then work from my list.”

“We buy cheaply and eat a lot of spaghetti and sauce and frozen food from Trader Joe's.”

Even though studies have shown that coupons may actually cost shoppers money by encouraging them to purchase more, for many respondents, manufacturers' promotions determined grocery purchases.<sup>xxxv</sup> Among our respondent base, “thrift” often translated to habits developed in response to intensive marketing by food manufacturers and retailers, i.e. clipping coupons and mailing in rebate offers. In 2000, it is estimated that food companies spent more than \$33 billion annually to promote their products, two-thirds of which was spent on discount incentives. Note that nearly 70% of food advertising is allocated to convenience foods, candy and snacks,

alcoholic beverages, soft drinks, and desserts, whereas just 2.2% is for fruits, vegetables, grains, and beans.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

A prime mode of "bargain shopping" at farmers markets would be to purchase in bulk during high season, when prices are most competitive, and preserve foods via freezing, canning, or drying methods. Based on barriers such as perceived high prices and inconvenience associated with vegetables, this may prove difficult if not impossible for many low-income shoppers. Only two respondents discussed preserving fresh foods as part of their routine.

### **Why Try Markets?**

#### *Location*

A convenient location was the most common reason why respondents had initially visited a farmers' market. Based on zip code reporting, 9 (8%) of the regular shoppers and 35 (32%) occasional shoppers lived within approximately two miles of a market.

"PSU [Portland Farmers Market's Portland State University site] was convenient when I was studying at school on Saturday. I could study and shop. It fit nicely into my routine."

According to Brown's 2002 inventory of farmers' market research conducted from 1940-2000, the most important factor in composition of the customer base of a farmers' market is location.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Markets draw primarily from the neighborhoods where they are sited.

#### *USDA Farmers' Market Nutrition Program*

Subsidy via the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program was the second most common motivator for trying farmers' markets. While most participants did not know they could use food stamps at area markets, 19 (18%) participants had used FMNP coupons. Most of these respondents credited WIC for making them aware of farmers' markets. But, when coupons ran out, recipients did not remain regular market customers. Note that in 2005, the WIC coupon allocation was \$20 per recipient for the season.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

"I qualified (for FMNP coupons) until my youngest turned two. My kids were too healthy to qualify beyond two. The experience of using them (coupons) at markets was very good."

Research shows that there is more interest in the USDA's FMNP than is being met by current funding.<sup>xxxix</sup> However, these programs reach a limited audience. For example, WIC serves mothers with children five years of age or younger and children must meet nutritional risk criteria.<sup>xl</sup>

### **Why Keep Coming Back?**

#### *Quality Produce*

Regular farmers' market shoppers cited fresher, better tasting, and higher quality produce than grocery store offerings as the prime reason for using markets. They valued the interaction with the farmer who grew the products and the opportunity to support local businesses. Some also mentioned that the prices were better than their grocery stores'.

“I want to support the farmers and I want to keep my neighborhood market going. In three years I’ve only missed two market days and one was because I was delivering my sons.”

### *Price*

According to Brown (2002), farmers' market prices are, in many cases, close to or above supermarket prices for some products, although the most recent data available is from 1974, highlighting a need for current analysis.<sup>xli</sup> In the case of our study, market prices were cited as both a reason to and not to shop farmers' markets regularly. In discussions of farmers' markets, price related to general farmers' market products, not specifically fruits and vegetables.

At Portland-area markets, although produce is the dominant available product group, it is sold along side local cheeses, chocolates, breads, grass-fed meats, and other artisan products that are generally more expensive than most of their large-scale processed counterparts available at discount grocery chains and superstores. While higher-priced artisan products may discourage low-income shoppers, the producers of these foods rely on markets as a key sales outlet and the inclusion of items such as bread and cheese allows shoppers to assemble a complete meal.

### *Social Benefits*

Occasional shoppers were likely to mention the fun atmosphere and sense of community within Portland's markets as the top reason for using them. This included comments about the social interaction with other shoppers, music, and activities for kids.

“The food is fresh. The people are nice. I like the social aspects, that I can talk to people.”

*Food Security and Sustainability* (Coveney 2000) discusses the role of food and foodways in providing 'glue' for a community or group. According to Coveney, some investigators have emphasized the importance of community food systems as ways of promoting economic, environmental and social benefits. While promoting local, fresh, seasonal foods, many community food efforts are also considered “friendly to the social environment as they are often structured so that they promote cooperation, trust and social cohesion.” In the case of farmers' markets, Coveney describes, “attempts to promote cooperation and trust by bringing producers and consumers together, face-to-face, to discuss the needs of shoppers who, at the same time, gain an understanding and respect for the whole process of farming.”<sup>xlii xliii</sup>

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Using Portland, Oregon as a case study, we examined food stamp clients' perceptions of farmers' markets in an effort to help market organizers promote newly established EBT programs. According to findings, if farmers' markets are to attract a critical mass of food stamp clients, first they will have to overcome both negative perceptions and operational realities: higher prices, inconvenient hours, complex shopping experiences, and limited discount opportunities.

EBT programs at farmers' markets are necessary because they provide open access to all. Unlike grocery chains and super stores, farmers' markets are perceived as community efforts and valued not just for connecting rural farmers to urban eaters, but also for bringing together diverse people who live within the communities they serve.

A dilemma for farmers markets is how to promote real cost-saving strategies that serve both shoppers and participating farmers. This requires an aggressive strategy for promoting farmers' market thrift, based not on cheap food, but on creative home economics. Food stamp shoppers would benefit from techniques for meal planning, shopping, and cooking that require little more time than is currently spent seeking discounts and preparing packaged foods. However, this only serves those who are currently able to use farmers' markets, likely a fraction of total food stamp clients.

Creating healthier communities, and specifically increasing produce consumption among the poor, is a goal that transcends farmers' markets. In a discussion of public health nutrition, Marianne Smith Edge of the American Dietetic Association describes a great unknown for today's community health professionals. "What we do not know is how to get people to make healthful choices while swimming in a sea of abundance. How do we express nebulous concepts such as variety and moderation in a way that is meaningful and manageable to consumers? And how do we communicate it to those populations that are most at risk of malnutrition resulting in obesity and chronic disease?"<sup>xliv</sup> Farmers' markets are one of the few food outlets in America where most of the choices are foods recommended as part of a healthy diet. The promotion of this type of shopping environment by community health advocates might be one way to encourage better food choices.

Findings demonstrate a desire by some respondents to include more fruits and vegetables in diets and real barriers to doing so. The success of the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program begs the question, "Can this model serve a broader group of those in need?" The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently issued "long awaited proposed regulations that would add almost \$500 million per year in fruit and vegetable buying power to WIC food packages, and for the first time, allow WIC to be spent at farmers' markets."<sup>xlv</sup> This is completely independent of the FMNP. With far greater reach, could food stamp subsidies similarly encourage produce consumption and ultimately improve the health of low-income citizens and the livelihoods of farmers?

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<sup>i</sup> Becker, G, Farmers' markets: the USDA role, CRS report for congress, 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> Nestle, M, Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health, University of California Press, 2002.

<sup>iii</sup> Pyle, G, Less Corn, More Hell, PublicAffairs, Perseus Books Group, 2005.

<sup>iv</sup> Brown, A, Counting farmers markets, *The Geographical Review*, 91: 4: 655-674.

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