

Food stamps a boon to local farmers markets

By ROSEANN HERNANDEZ
OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

WATSONVILLE — It is a sun-drenched, Friday afternoon at the downtown Watsonville Certified Farmers Market.

The market has been open for just 15 minutes but already it is a hive of activity. Farmers are making the final touches on their stalls, setting out tasting trays, folks are purchasing plates of prepared food to eat at tables set up at the plaza, and a line of primarily women and children has formed at a table at the center of the market to collect their wooden tokens and food vouchers to be spent on fresh fruits and vegetables.

The tokens and food vouchers are part of federally funded nutrition assistance programs for low-income families and individuals, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), SNAP (or Cal Fresh as it is called in the state) and the Senior Farmers' Market Nutri-

tion Program for low-income seniors.

"The farmers market in Watsonville is basically a social services market," said Nancy Gammons, farmer's market manager.

"And that is OK — food is essential," Gammons said. "Here in Watsonville, we don't have a 'food desert' but a 'money desert.'"

Accepting food stamps (now known as Cal Fresh) or vouchers at farmers markets is nothing new.

Before transitioning to EBT (electronic benefit transfer) in 2003, farmers could accept paper food stamps, and Community Bridges WIC administered the Farmers Market Nutrition Program, which provided vouchers once a year to eligible women and children to be used to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at farmers markets since 1994.

But for many low-income families, farmers markets were

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perceived as "off-limits" and too expensive to regularly utilize, according to Joel Campos, senior manager of Outreach and Education at Second Harvest Food Bank.

Echoing that sentiment was Patricia Organista, site manager and farmers market coordinator for Community Bridges WIC.

Organista said it took some time for WIC clients to take to the farmers market, but now the Farmers Market Nutrition Program vouchers go quickly when they are distributed each summer.

Second Harvest Food Bank started outreaching Cal Fresh at the farmers market in Watsonville in 2002 and now has a regular presence at the market, processing EBT and helping enroll folks who are eligible to participate.

Campos said, since then, produce at the market has become more affordable and there has been a concerted effort to educate Cal Fresh recipients about using their food benefit at local farmers markets.

But not all farmers markets are authorized to accept EBT.

Farmers markets or market vendors need to first be authorized by Food and Nutrition Services, and there are currently 345 such authorized farmers markets operating across the state — six in Santa Cruz County, including the Watsonville Certified Farmers Market and all five markets in the Santa Cruz Community Farmers Markets family, according to the California Department of Social Services.

Through the state's Farmers Market program, farmers markets are given the option of having one POS machine for the entire market or having in-

dividual vendors outfitted with EBT machines to accept cash aid or Cal Fresh to purchase locally grown, fresh fruits and vegetables.

Most farmers' markets opt for one machine per market, according to Michael Weston, deputy director of Public Affairs and Outreach Programs, California Department of Social Services.

Monterey Bay Certified Farmers Markets, including the Aptos Farmers Market at Cabrillo College on Saturdays, does not accept EBT.

Market Manager Catherine Barr said they are in the process of trying to be accepted, but that it was a long road.

Barr said for a nonprofit organization that relies on volunteers, designing their own tokens, managing a POS machine and monitoring the program is a tall order.

"It is such a good program, but they make it so difficult for farmers markets to accept them," said Barr.

Barr, whose been at the helm of the Monterey Bay Certified Farmers Markets for 20 years, said the paper food stamps were easier to deal with and she wished a third party would just standardize and operate the program at farmers markets across the state.

"We would be happy to have a table for them," said Barr.

Food benefits

In 2012, a total of \$6,037,345 in Cal Fresh food benefit was redeemed at authorized farmers markets across the state, and as of June 30, the figure for 2013 is \$3,097,776, according to California Department of Social Services.

"What's nice about it, is that people are using that money within our state supporting local farms, whereas when you buy produce in a grocery store that money could be going to an out-of-state supplier," said Patricia Rodriguez of Rodri-

quez Farms and the manager of El Mercado Popular, a farmers market at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds on Sundays.

Rodriguez said El Mercado Popular is in the process of applying to receive their EBT authorization.

Esther Vasquez of Vasquez Farms, which offers an assortment of organic berries grown in nearby Moss Landing, said for her, the EBT and wooden token process at the Watsonville Certified Farmers Market is easy.

Plus, it introduces organic to "people who never really thought about organic before."

Nesh Dhillon, manager of the Santa Cruz Community Farmers Markets, said using food benefit at farmers markets help "level the playing field."

"People think they can't shop at farmers markets because it is too expensive, but I don't agree with that," he said.

"And this is one way to combat those assumptions — if they got food assistance, what better place to use it?"

The Santa Cruz Community Farmers Market, whose busy downtown Santa Cruz market on Wednesdays gets help from Second Harvest Food Bank and WIC to operate its EBT and voucher programs, was one of five farmers market associations selected by the state to participate in a pilot program using iPhone applications as way to modernize the redemption system.

Dhillon said they were selected due to their high EBT redemption rates.

"I love the idea that food assistance helps more than just those redeeming it on their card," said Dhillon. "It helps local farmers, local banks, however and wherever that dollar travels. And it is supporting sustainable agriculture, which is the focus of what we do — small scale, local sustainable and organic farming."



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Watsonville Certified Farmers Market Manager Nancy Gammons holds out a pile of wooden tokens that people who receive food assistance can use to purchase fresh produce at the downtown market.