

COMMENTARY ON COVID-19 AND THE FOOD SYSTEM

Farmers markets: Working with community partners to provide essential services during COVID-19

JAFSCD
Responds to
the COVID-19
Pandemic



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Submitted July 13, 2020 / Published online August 26, 2020

Citation: Klisch, S., & Soule, K. E. (2020). Beyond COVID-19: Farmers markets: Working with community partners to provide essential services during COVID-19. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 9(4), 175–179. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2020.094.035>

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I will do whatever it takes to keep it open.

—Farmers Market Manager in San Luis Obispo County on efforts to keep the markets open during the pandemic

In San Luis Obispo (SLO) County, California, the SLO Food System Coalition hosts an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) at Farmers' Markets Workgroup. Workgroup partners include representatives from food banks, public health departments, social services, University of California (UC) Cooperative Extension (UCCE), and local farmers market associations. The workgroup aims to increase the use of CalFresh (formerly known as food stamps, known nationally as SNAP) at farmers markets in SLO

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Funding Disclosure

United States Department of Agriculture, SNAP-Ed program

Acknowledgments

Robyn Gable, North County Farmers Market Manager for her support of the EBT at Farmers' Markets workgroup and participation in data collection for this article. For all San Luis Obispo County Disaster Service Workers whose dedication and service helped keep markets open and safe.

County to foster (1) equitable access to healthy foods, and (2) support for local farmers.

In SLO County, there are 14 year-round, weekly farmers markets. Of those markets, eight accept CalFresh¹ benefits and seven offer the Market Match² incentive program. Market Match is California's healthy food incentive program, which matches CalFresh shoppers' benefits dollar for dollar, providing additional money to spend on fruits and vegetables at participating farmers markets. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded and shelter-at-home was mandated, markets strove to operate as essential food outlets. The pandemic forced many to think about the security of global supply chains and the role that local farmers markets play in supporting food security and public health.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to income loss for many individuals and households, which increases their risk of food insecurity and related poor health outcomes. CalFresh is one of the largest and most effective tools at reducing food insecurity (Mabli, Ohls, Dragoset, Castner, & Santos, 2013) while stimulating economic activity, particularly during economic downturns (Canning & Stacy, 2019). However, there is evidence that these benefits do not reach low-income qualifying households equitably. A 2018 study found that CalFresh participation among farmworkers in California was disproportionately low compared to other regions and documented that Latino farmworker immigrants in all regions studied are 40% less likely to participate in SNAP than comparable households headed by non-Latinos (Medel-Herrero & Leigh, 2018). CalFresh is a federally funded food assistance program. Funds ranging from US\$16-US\$194 per person per month are issued on an EBT debit card to be used at many grocery stores and farmers markets. At the start of the pandemic, to address food insecurity the federal government issued an additional US\$365 per child for qualifying families through a Pandemic EBT program, and a COVID Emergency Allotment for CalFresh recipients, during April and May 2020. Comparing April data from 2019 to 2020, SLO County saw a 22% increase in the number of individuals receiving CalFresh.

Innovation

Recognizing the importance of farmers markets that accept CalFresh in supporting the health, food security, and economy of the local community, the workgroup collaborated to ensure that markets could stay open. In the days immediately following the shelter-at-home order, local SLO County market managers joined many across the country in implementing safety measures that included installing barriers and directional tape to manage traffic flow, increasing space between vendor stalls, and posting information about how to avoid the spread of COVID-19. Local market managers provided gloves and hand sanitizer to all vendors and customers. Vendors were trained in proper glove use and handling money with one hand and produce with the other. Customers were no longer permitted to handle products, and signs were posted to let them know that the vendor would hand them their requested food items. Vendors were prohibited from providing tasting and samples, and procedures for managing lines to allow social distancing were implemented, including placing signage and tape to allow six feet of distance between nonhousehold members. Vendors were also innovative. Some used large tongs to grab produce for customers, and others prepackaged produce items for grab and go. In addition, several markets provided early shopping hours for elderly or high-risk patrons.

As these new procedures were established, market managers sought support from the workgroup to ensure the consistent implementation of safety practices and to increase the promotion of markets. Workgroup partners requested that county disaster service workers (DSWs) be deployed to help manage social distancing. In addition to training and supervising the DSWs, partners created bilingual signage,

¹ <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/food-nutrition/calfresh>

² <https://marketmatch.org/>

generated content for print³ and social media outreach, and developed flyers and promotional videos⁴ to let CalFresh recipients know that farmers markets are open and a safe place to shop with their CalFresh card. This work was promoted by all workgroup partners at food bank distributions, social service offices, through social media channels, and in local media. With the help of the DSWs, market staff enhanced signage at points of entry, set up a portable handwashing station, enforced limits on customer entry, and reminded vendors and customers to follow safety protocols. To onboard the DSWs, the workgroup chair utilized best practices from the Farmers Market Coalition website.⁵ Additional factsheets from the UCCE office were provided, including *Supporting Worker Safety in Agricultural Operations during COVID-19 Outbreak*,⁶ *Food Safety Guidance during the COVID-19 Outbreak*,⁷ and CDC information about why six feet is important.⁸ The DSWs wore vests with name tags to identify them as farmers market staff, and they were provided face coverings upon request, gloves, hand sanitizer, and social distancing enforcement tools, such as tape, markers, and a six-foot (2 m) section of PVC pipe to measure out increments for social distancing areas.

Challenges

Challenges with managing markets during the pandemic are ongoing and include managing conflicting community perceptions and increasing safety and accessibility as regions begin to reopen. In the beginning, some local customers shared complaints publicly that markets were not doing enough, while other customers expressed their anger to the market manager that there were too many safety procedures in place. Additionally, the DSWs were pulled into other job assignments at the last minute, and it was difficult to fill their shifts at the farmers market, leaving market managers scrambling to find help. Markets that do not accept CalFresh benefits were frustrated that they were ineligible to receive workgroup support.

An ongoing challenge, amplified as additional households qualify for CalFresh benefits due to the impacts of COVID-19, is creating farmers markets that are reflective of communities and include people of all income levels, languages spoken, races, and ethnicities. Alkon and McCullen (2011) argue that farmers markets have the potential to be spaces for equitable and inclusive food movements, yet are predominantly white, “racialized spaces” and affirming of white, affluent, and liberal identities. This “racialized space” inhibits the participation of people of color and makes invisible the injustices in our food system, including the oppression of predominantly low-paid Latino/a workers who carry out the bulk of food cultivation. A 2016 systematic review (Freedman et al., 2016) found that low-income shoppers perceived that farmers markets do not accept food assistance programs, that there was limited food variety, and that there was a lack of racial/ethnic diversity in the market space. In addition, Colasanti, Conner, and Smalley (2010) found that Latina women report feeling disrespected and their children unwelcome by vendors and consumers at farmers markets, especially compared to white children. In focus groups with people who speak Spanish and have participated in CalFresh in SLO County (not yet published), barriers to shopping at farmers markets included that they did not know they could use CalFresh and Market Match there, that markets that did have these programs were located very far away, and that markets mostly carry produce that is familiar to white consumers.

³ See examples of print promotion at

<https://www.ksby.com/news/local-news/central-coast-farmers-markets-provide-affordable-produce-for-cal-fresh-participants>

⁴ <https://www.emergencyslo.org/en/food-assistance.aspx#Market-Match-at-Farmers-Markets>

⁵ <https://farmersmarketcoalition.org/covid-19-crisis-farmers-market-new-guidelines>

⁶ <https://ucanr.edu/sites/SLO/files/323154.pdf>

⁷ <https://ucanr.edu/sites/SLO/files/322022.pdf>


⁸ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html>

Impact

From March to June 2020, workgroup members coordinated and trained 14 DSWs, who provided more than 140 hours of support to partnering farmers markets. This collaboration allowed markets to stay open and provide a safe and reliable source of food for CalFresh clients throughout SLO County. Without this partnership, some markets that accept CalFresh benefits would have closed.

There is evidence that markets have seen an increase in customers since the shelter-at-home order went into place. According to one market manager, “[The pandemic] has ... revived farmers markets. It seems like we have the highest numbers ever as far as gross overall in the market and we don’t even have all of our seasonal vendors yet.” Actual client numbers to evaluate the impact will be available in September. Customers are grateful, according to the manager: “People are thankful. They say thank you for ... all of your efforts.” Others have expressed how important their farmers market is to them right now as a place where they can be outside, see people in their community, and have access to healthy food.

Looking Forward

COVID-19 will continue to affect farmers markets and our communities for the foreseeable future. The DSWs will not be available after July 1, 2020, as they return to their work duties. The workgroup continues to evaluate how to leverage resources so farmers markets can become more accessible to all customers, to anticipate higher demand as more people become eligible for CalFresh, and to work toward the ideal of becoming a space for a just food movement. To that end, the workgroup is developing a Market Navigator⁹ project modeled after the Michigan Fitness Foundation Food Navigator program and developed in collaboration with local promotores (community health workers). The goals of the project are to improve farmers market accessibility through community engagement, training of bicultural community leaders, improvements to the market environments, and enhanced and targeted market promotion to low-income communities and Spanish speakers. In addition, the workgroup is planning to investigate the location of markets that offer the financial incentive Market Match in relation to low-income census tracts locally. Concurrently, workgroup members are forming another alliance to address access to Market Match in low-income areas in Santa Barbara County. Farmers markets have an essential role to play in regional food security during COVID-19 and also have a long way to go in terms of creating a more just and equitable food system. 

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⁹ <https://snap-ed.michiganfitness.org/wp-content/uploads/2019-Farmers-Market-Food-Navigator-Infographic.pdf>

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