



Increasing Access to Healthy Food in the Central Valley through Farmers Markets and Produce Stands

Issue Brief

May 2010

Why Farmers Markets and Produce Stands in the Central Valley?

The Central Valley, one of our nation's richest agricultural regions, is lacking easy access to the many fruits and vegetables grown in the region. Low income residents, who may work in the fields, do not have stores or markets in their neighborhoods that sell fresh fruits and vegetables. Yet, there is overwhelming support for and interest in shopping at farmers markets among Central Valley residents¹. The Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) sites are changing this landscape, community by community. In Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, Stanislaus, and Tulare counties, CCROPP partners have established or expanded

farmers markets and/or produce stands to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables for diverse communities in locations where access had been absent or limited. They have gone about these changes in innovative ways. Some of the CCROPP sites have also established farmers markets that accept supplemental nutrition assistance payment options (WIC or EBT) to help improve access for low-income individuals and families.

This brief discusses strategies for improving nutrition environments through farmers markets and produce stands including challenges and lessons learned. The brief includes findings from environmental assessments of the CCROPP farmers markets and produce stands conducted from 2007-2009.

EBT Meets Needs During Economic Downturn

Farmers markets and produce stands have historically run on a cash-only basis, making them inaccessible to many low-income shoppers who rely on food-stamps for some or all of their food purchases. The Mineni family, owners of flea and farmers markets in the Central Valley, tackled this problem by bringing in an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) machine. Though federal regulations proved somewhat difficult to navigate, they were determined that their clientele needed it and would use it. By partnering with CCROPP to promote EBT use at these markets, EBT food sales have increased dramatically throughout this time of nationwide economic crisis.

¹CCROPP Community Resident Survey available at www.samuelsandassociates.com

Prepared by:



Funded by:



The Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP)

creates environments that support healthy eating and active living in eight San Joaquin Valley counties. The regional obesity prevention program is administered by the Central California Center for Health and Human Services and is housed at California State University, Fresno, and partners with the Central California Public Health Partnership. The program is funded by The California Endowment. Samuels & Associates is conducting a CCROPP evaluation.



Impact of Farmers Markets and Produce Stands in the Central Valley

- Increased access to healthy foods in the Central Valley locally and regionally
- Increased collaboration between community, schools, public health, cities, farmers, vendors, WIC and EBT/SNAP
- Sharing of strategies and best practices
- Local produce kept local
- Attracting diverse customers (community residents, parents, school staff, WIC and EBT/SNAP clients)

Evaluation Methods

The evaluation team visited each of the seven participating CCROPP counties and conducted an environmental assessment of the selected farmers market or produce stand. They developed a tool to inventory the available products being sold at the markets and stands, to make note of the number of vendors, to record signage and advertisements in the vicinity, and to document the apparent accessibility of the markets and stands to the targeted population.

In addition, the tool contained a set of interview questions to be asked of the CCROPP partner involved with the market or stand. The questions probed for details on the process behind making the changes; challenges, barriers and benefits encountered thus far in the work; unanticipated outcomes and partnerships; special programming held in conjunction with the markets and stands; efforts to ensure sustainability; and general demographics of patrons.

Grantee Strategies

The CCROPP grantees each had a different approach to expanding the availability of fresh produce within their communities. Strategies included:

- Expanding existing farmers markets to have more products and a regular weekly schedule
- Establishing expansive produce sales at flea markets
- Partnering with a county public health department or community-based organization
- Locating produce stands on school campuses
- Offering EBT, WIC and/or senior nutrition vouchers for use at markets and stands
- Engaging community support for markets

Policy Change Creates Environmental Change

A local zoning ordinance prevented CCROPP staff and Fresno farmers from starting new farmers markets. While working on changing that ordinance to allow farmers markets in residential and commercial zoning, CCROPP found that schools were not subject to city ordinances. CCROPP worked with a local farmer and the Fresno Unified School District to open a farm stand one afternoon per week on an elementary school campus. School students, staff and parents, as well as area residents, embraced the stand's convenience and affordability. Seeing that farm stand's success, other Fresno Schools and neighborhoods became interested. CCROPP staff worked with several schools in low income neighborhoods to develop and open similar farm stands, with more still in the works.



What the Farmers Markets and Stands Look Like

Four farmers markets and three produce stands were visited as part of the evaluation. Each of these markets and stands were either created or intensively supported by CCROPP grantee efforts. The size of the stands and markets varied widely, from a single table to many tables within a large flea market. The number of vendors also varied. All three of the produce stands, as well as one of the farmers markets, were serviced solely by local vendors. The remaining three farmers markets had a mix of vendors selling local and non-local produce.

- Across all sites, approximately 566 individual products were found at the markets and stands. However, the range of number of product was wide – 5 fruits and vegetables observed at the smallest stand, up to 359 at the largest market.
- Overall, 46% of the observed products were vegetables, 29% were fruits, and 25% were other products, including nuts and seeds, candies, and dried fruits and vegetables.

- The average cost of a pound of fresh produce was \$1.13. When sold per item, however, prices varied. The average cost of fruit (when sold per item) was \$1.57, whereas a vegetable averaged \$0.84.

“All the parents come to pick up their kids and they just buy the produce there at the school [farm stand]. It’s very convenient.”
-Pixley Parent

Challenges

The CCROPP sites experienced a variety of challenges in establishing farmers markets and produce stands in their communities. The Central Valley has high rates of poverty and unemployment. Resources are few and disparities are wide-spread. The sites experienced the following challenges:

- Attracting local farmers
- Farmers markets offering EBT/WIC redemption viewed as serving only low-income community residents
- Lack of resources for promoting farmers markets

Sustainability Through Policy

One common goal among CCROPP-supported markets and stands was to obtain or maintain the use of EBT and/or WIC vouchers at their market or stand. In addition, several of the sites are looking into other ways to sustain the markets and farm stands through policy-related measures, such as ordinance changes. The grantees are also working with various municipal and county departments to provide technical assistance on EBT/WIC applications and city/county regulations, allowing markets and farm stands to continue to expand.



Innovative Partnerships Breed Success

In the summer of 2007, CCROPP grantees within the Kern County Public Health Department (PHD) opened a small farmers market on site. It is recognized as the first public health department-initiated farmers market to be held on public health department grounds in California. The process of maintaining the farmers market at this location involved collaboration and persistence. CCROPP grantees struggled initially to garner buy-in from the PHD administration. It was also difficult to advertise the market adequately given the available funding. Eventually, local media published and broadcasted the announcements sent to them by CCROPP partners, and e-mails and postings on the county employee systems drew customers from the PHD. WIC coupons were accepted by the vendors, opening the door for low-income residents to access the produce sold there.

Lessons Learned

The following lessons learned may be drawn from these findings:

- Farmers markets are a viable option for increasing access to healthy food in underserved communities.
- Farmers markets contribute to the local economy and raise awareness about locally grown produce.
- Implementing EBT/WIC increases the reach of farmers markets to low income communities.
- Locating farmers markets and produce stands in places where people already go, such as school grounds, flea markets, and public health departments, increases accessibility, visibility, and viability.
- Establishing farmers markets and produce stands may require changes in local zoning ordinances.

Despite challenging environmental circumstances, where dramatic disparities exist, the CCROPP communities have increased access to healthy food opportunities in poor, urban, rural and unincorporated communities throughout the region. Farmers markets have brought vitality to neighborhoods and brought

a diversity of partners together including schools, community residents, public health departments, and farmers. Fresh fruits and vegetables are within easier reach for Central Valley communities. These markets and stands are time intensive to develop and maintain and need the continued support of CCROPP sites and their community partners to remain viable and expand.

Resources

For more information on CCROPP, including the “10 Steps to Setting Up a School Fruit and Vegetable Stand” and other farmers market resources, contact 559.228.2140 or visit www.ccropp.org.

Contact Us

For more information about this evaluation, please contact:

Samuels & Associates

www.samuelsandassociates.com

1222 Preservation Park Way, Oakland, CA 94612

Phone: 510.271.6799

Fax: 510.271.6791

Email: Nicole@samuelsandassociates.com

Authors: Sarah Samuels, DrPH

Liz Schwarte, MPH

Krista Hutchinson, MPH

Nicole Griffin, MFA, Editor