

Federal grant increases fresh fruit and vegetable purchase at farmers market

The federal Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) grant, awarded by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) USDA has partnered with Fort Bragg Farmers Market in offering market match dollars to its customers. The grant, awarded to the Ecology Center in 2015, was for two 12-month periods (April 2015 – March 2017) and started out with 30 farmers' market and non-profit partners, who offer Market Match at 230 sites throughout California. With the help of North Coast Opportunities, Fort Bragg Farmers Market manager Julie Apostolu was able to include our local farmers market in this federal matching program for the May 2016-April 2017 period offering Market Match healthy food SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly Food Stamps) incentives. The Market Match project purpose is to *increase the purchase of fruits and vegetables by low-income consumers participating in SNAP by providing incentives at the point of purchase.*

The food stamp matching program at the Fort Bragg Farmers' Market is a simple, low cost project that does amazing things on many levels. The program uses funds raised from the community to provide an incentive for CalFresh/EBT/Food Stamp users to shop at Fort Bragg Farmers Market. The federal program “matches” (i.e., doubles) a portion of the money customers commit to spend from their CalFresh/EBT/Food Stamp at the farmers market. Starting May 2016 EBT recipients received up to an additional \$10 when they spent \$10 or more of their food stamp money at the Fort Bragg Farmers Market. Now the matching money has increased to \$30 per week.

CalFresh/EBT/Food Stamp customers are our low income neighbors most susceptible to food insecurity, related stress and health strains. Less healthy eating adds to the burden. As a community we experience those stresses together. The current food subsidy system worsens the problem by (mostly) ignoring small farms producing healthy food.

The Market Match program provides several important benefits to both individuals and the community. The program allows SNAP users to stretch their federal benefits further each month. As one example, a customer using the program last summer at the Ukiah Farmers Market stated that it was *only* because of the match program that she was getting fresh produce at all. The program brings new CalFresh/EBT/Food Stamp customers to the farmers market every week. Our community gets healthier family by family. These new customers are spending money at the farmers market each week. As the program keeps running, word of mouth promotion brings in new people who have never been to a farmers' market before.

Just as important for our local economy, when EBT/Food Stamps are spent at the

Farmers' Market, it injects federal money into our county's local farm and ranch economy. Even a small increase in support can make a big difference to local farms. An Essex County, MA study found that if only 1% of locals shifted \$12 per week over the growing season to farm stands, farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture (C.S.A), net income of county farmers would increase by 50%. Due to the multiplier effect, keeping more food dollars in the local economy also boosts income in our economy for everyone.

The program relies on volunteers and business sponsorships. The volunteer time is matched with \$20 per hour by the federal government and significantly increases funds for the Market Match. For the May 2016- April 2017 growing season four local businesses donated \$2,200, which were matched dollar for dollar by the federal grant. We are very grateful for the generous donations given by local businesses and volunteers donating their time to this worthy project.

Julie Apostolu will be giving specifics about the Market Match program during her September 12 City Council meeting presentation.

If you have additional questions about the Fort Bragg Farmer's Market Match program, please contact Julie Apostolu at 962-0297 and forestlove@lanset.com. For more information about the program visit <http://www.marketmatch.org>