

Produce Perks Response to COVID-19

Changes in Ohio's Nutrition Incentive Programming and Farmers' Market Operations

May 2021

Produce Perks: Ohio's Nutrition Incentive Program

Ohio's nutrition incentive program, Produce Perks, increases affordable access to fresh and healthy foods for families and individuals shopping with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Produce Perks matches the value of SNAP benefits \$1-for-\$1 when purchasing fruits and vegetables, which can then be used to buy more produce. The program is available at over 100 Direct-To-Consumer (DTC) sites (i.e. farmers' markets, farm stands, mobile markets, Community Supported Agriculture programs) and Ohio-owned grocery stores across the state. SNAP incentive programming in Ohio has grown significantly since pilot programs launched at Northeastern Ohio farmers' markets in 2009. Learn more about operations of the Produce Perks program at produceperks.org.

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From March 17 through June 30, 2020, the Produce Perks program offered an unlimited match at all operating DTC sites to support local farmers and healthy food purchasing for SNAP households. Prior to March 17, Produce Perks matched SNAP dollars up to \$20 per day. During the unlimited match period, farmers' markets matched any amount of SNAP spent at the market, increasing the purchasing power of SNAP consumers and dollars spent on locally grown produce. Customer data collected at markets during this time period show that unique SNAP customers increased 37% from 2019 (65 operating markets) to 2020 (56 operating markets), despite the fact that many markets changed operations and others could not open during the 2020 season due to COVID-19.

SNAP sales
increased

173%

from 2019 to 2020
(March - June)

Produce Perks
incentives redeemed
increased

72%

from 2019 to 2020
(March - June)

Unique SNAP
customers increased

37%

from 2019 to 2020
(March - June)

The increase in sales and customers seen above can be attributed to: the unlimited program match, Ohio's 40% increase in allotted SNAP benefits (1), and the state's distribution of Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) benefits for all children eligible for free and reduced lunch programs (2). P-EBT dollars are also eligible for the Produce Perks match.



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Farmers' Markets Are An Essential Service

Amidst the chaos of the pandemic, in spring 2020, Governor DeWine deemed farmers' markets an essential service (3). During this time, farmers' markets emerged as key contributors to Ohio's community and economy by:

- Providing local farmers and other small businesses a venue to continue sales as restaurant and institutional purchasing declined
- Providing consumers a safe outdoor shopping location and access to healthy foods
- Developing online, curbside pick-up, and delivery options for high-risk shoppers
- Supporting the unlimited Produce Perks program match to ease the financial burden of SNAP customers to buy nutritious fruits and vegetables and increase food security.

The modification of farmers' markets to remain safely open took enormous strength, effort and innovation on the part of the hundreds of market staff and volunteers across the state. A *Nutrition Incentive Hub Capacity and Innovation Grant* allowed for distribution of hand sanitizer, bleach and physical distancing signage at Ohio markets. Additionally, the grant provided funds to support five markets in adopting online pre-order, additional COVID-19 safety equipment, additional marketing, and increased staff time.

Looking Forward: Ohio Farmers, Farmers' Markets and Produce Perks

Ohio markets demonstrated their dedication to our local food system in 2020, but the pandemic revealed the fragility of the infrastructure that supports millions of dollars of purchasing from local farmers and Ohio small businesses. City and state-level support is needed to grow and sustain a resilient food system, which is crucial health and economic infrastructure for Ohioans (4). Produce Perks will continue to serve communities in need of increased healthy food access and contribute to a more equitable and prosperous local economy (5).

Policy makers at the municipal, county and state level can implement programs that support infrastructure development of farmers' market, affordable permits, free wireless SNAP card reader equipment, increased SNAP and nutrition incentive dollars, small farmer and food business programs, and online SNAP sales technology development for farmers' markets.

(1) usda.gov/media/press-releases/2020/04/22/usda-increases-monthly-snap-benefits-40

(2) jfs.ohio.gov/RELEASES/pdf/051220-Pandemic-EBT-Benefits-to-Support-Children.stm

(3) content.govdelivery.com/attachments/OHOOD/2020/03/22/file_attachments/1407840/Stay%20Home%20Order.pdf

(4) action.oeffa.com/opportunity-in-crisis-report/

(5) fairfoodnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Economic_Contributions_Incentives_2_2_21.pdf

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