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Lawmakers help food stamps get to farmers markets

Lawmakers look to get food stamps to more farmers markets, offer recipients healthier options

By **CATHY BUSSEWITZ**, Associated Press

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SACRAMENTO, Calif. -- Tina Tennyson loved to make raspberry jam using the fresh fruit she bought at the farmers market in San Jose. When she recently moved to Sacramento, she hit a stumbling block: the local market didn't accept food stamps.

Like most farmers markets across the state, the one held Sundays in the state capital only accepts cash.

Lawmakers are considering a bill that would help the markets get equipment to accept electronic food stamp benefits cards -- joining legislatures nationwide considering similar measures they hope will expand the menu of fresh food options for the poor as food stamp enrollment soars.

"Everything in the supermarket is expensive, and a lot of their fruit and stuff is not ripe," said Tennyson, a 39-year-old grandmother who feeds a family of three on \$300 a month. She called California's bill "a good idea."

The supermarket checkout counter-style card readers operate like those used for bank debit cards, except the cards cannot be used to get cash. Only about 15 percent of the 640 markets in the state have the capability.

State Assemblyman Juan Arambula said he introduced the bill to help poor people gain more access to fresh fruits and vegetables because poverty and unhealthy lifestyles lead to obesity and diabetes. Unemployment soars above 30 percent in some communities in Arambula's Central Valley district.

"You have poor people who work out in the field and make very little money, and they can't afford to buy nutritious food for their families," said Arambula, an independent from Fresno.

The need is growing amid the struggling economy, and persistent joblessness.

Enrollment in the federal food stamp program grew by 43 percent in California from October 2007 until October 2009, according to the nonprofit California Budget Project. By comparison, the group says enrollment grew by 6 percent over the same period

from 2001-2003, the last significant economic downturn.

Ballooning food stamp programs also have prompted lawmakers in Indiana, Texas, Vermont and other states to propose laws that would make it easier for farmers markets to get and use the machines, said Douglas Shinkle, policy specialist at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

"This has definitely been a popular issue," said Shinkle, who is working with a lawmaker on drafting a similar proposal in Illinois.

Most farmers markets in California are cash-only operations and are set up in fields or parking lots that lack electricity. To accept the cards, the markets have to get approval from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and obtain a reader. Wireless devices can be used, but they cost about \$1,000.

"They just don't have the money and personnel to do it. They're just too tight on their budgets right now," said Dan Bass, general counsel for the California Federation of Certified Farmers Markets, which promotes and lobbies for 140 markets.

Bass originally opposed the bill, which would have required the markets to accept the cards, but then worked with Arambula to make it more acceptable to farmers: the requirement was dropped, in favor of encouraging third parties to set up the machines for the markets or in some cases run them.

The Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association, which trains farmers to become independent and sell directly to customers, helped draft the bill. The group has worked with farmers markets from Fresno to Oakland to set up the systems.

The legislation was modeled after a San Francisco ordinance that requires all farmers markets operating within the city to accept the food-stamp cards, said Martha Guzman, a legislative advocate for the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation.

"The legislation is a huge compromise," she said. "It's not the model that's ideal, but I think it's one small step forward."

On a recent, rainy Saturday morning at the farmers market in the San Francisco Ferry Plaza, farmer Johann Smith reached over tables overflowing with cider bottles and pink lady apples, exchanging cash and small talk with customers who ranged from top-tier chefs to stroller-pushing moms.

Smith said when customers hand him wooden coins, the market's currency for food stamps, he usually gives them a hefty discount.

"It's a way to give access to people who wouldn't normally have access to a farmers market," he said.

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