

Produce-buying incentive program a win-win for Oregon consumers and farmers

May 26 2020, by Molly Rosbach

A national program that offers financial incentives so that low-income consumers can purchase more fruits and vegetables has shown great success in Oregon, according to a recent Oregon State University study.

The Double Up Food Bucks [program](#) is one of many produce-incentive programs that pair with SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program commonly referred to as [food stamps](#). For every dollar SNAP recipients spend on eligible foods at participating farmers markets and [grocery stores](#), they get an additional dollar they can put toward more Oregon-grown fruits and vegetables.

In [OSU's study](#), 91% of program participants surveyed reported buying more fruits and vegetables. Nearly 70% reported eating less processed food; 81% said they had more [food](#) available at home; and nearly 88% said they felt healthier because they were eating more fresh produce. The study analyzed survey data from 1,223 people at 42 farmers markets across Oregon.

"I think this evaluation demonstrates that this program works for low-income consumers, and it's great for farmers," said study author Stephanie Grutzmacher, an assistant professor in OSU's College of Public Health and Human Sciences.

Grassroots programs to incentivize low-income shoppers to purchase locally grown produce at farmers markets began around 2006 in locations such as Washington, D.C., New York and Michigan,

Grutzmacher said. The U.S. Department of Agriculture liked the idea and started to provide grants for new programs. Oregon received one of those grants in 2015 to implement a statewide program, and since then the state Legislature has provided money to continue the program, though that funding is not permanent.

The study also examined people's perceptions of farmers markets and how those perceptions affected their experience with Double Up Food Bucks. Perceptions varied significantly between different demographics.

"A lot of people have a really wide range of experiences with farmers markets; some people perceive them to be really homogenous spaces for well-to-do people, and others perceive them to be really community-centered and accessible," Grutzmacher said. "Both of those things can be true, and everything in between can be true."

Adults ages 55 and older were more likely to view farmers markets as more expensive than where they normally shopped, which meant they saw less value in the Double Up Food Bucks voucher than people who considered [farmers markets](#) affordable.

Though the study wasn't able to analyze shoppers by specific ethnicity, non-white shoppers were more likely to report overall health improvements than white shoppers.

Eating more fresh fruits and vegetables "is one of those 'should' things that people carry around a lot," Grutzmacher said. "I think when this program makes that produce more accessible to them and gives them more purchasing power, people are able to cross a 'should' off their list and they're able to roll that into their perception that their health is better."

To address the disparity in perception and experience, Grutzmacher

would like to see program organizers at both the [market](#) and state level design targeted outreach strategies to increase participation among groups of people who don't perceive the vouchers to be as useful.

For people who are not familiar with farmers market pricing or style, she said, organizers could host market tours to help them learn which vegetables are in season or how to make the most cost-effective choices. Educators could even hold cooking demonstrations at the market. She pointed to the example of [SNAP To It](#), a program started a few years ago by the OSU Extension Service in Clackamas County to lead monthly tours during market season.

"I think they can really shape people's perceptions of things like affordability by providing extra educational resources at the market," Grutzmacher said.

The study used [survey data](#) collected by Farmers Market Fund, which runs the Double Up Food Bucks program under the leadership of executive director Molly Notarianni. Lead author was OSU global health Ph.D. student Briana Rockler, working under professor Ellen Smit and Grutzmacher.

More information: Briana E. Rockler et al, Participant Perceptions of the Double Up Food Bucks Program at Oregon Farmers' Markets, *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2020.02.016](#)

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