



Big changes are coming to food benefit programs at California's farmers markets. Amidst all of the acronyms, rules, applications, and restrictions is one central point: as a result of these changes farmers will be able to accept multiple types of food benefits using just their cell phone and the amount of food benefit dollars that customers can spend in a farmers market will increase dramatically.

The state of California is transitioning its [Farmers Market Nutrition Program](#) (FMNP), which provides food benefits for low-income families with small children and low-income seniors, to an electronic system. This new Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) system replaces the paper vouchers that have been used in farmers markets for over 20 years.

FMNP is a federal food benefit program. While significantly smaller than the federal SNAP program (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, known in California as CalFresh) or the federal WIC (Women, Infant and Children) program, FMNP is the only food benefit program that is exclusively for use in farmers markets. During the 2024 season, eligible families and seniors received booklets of \$10 checks that they could spend with farmers in farmers markets on fresh fruits and vegetables. Starting in 2025, eligible recipients will no longer receive paper vouchers; instead, they will be provided with a debit card that they can use to make those farmers market purchases.

PCFMA has been monitoring the state's eFMNP transition plan for over two years, advocating for a system that provides the most flexibility for California's small-scale farmers and the most convenience for customers who receive the benefits. As a part of this effort, PCFMA's Executive Director, Allen Moy, has attended the national conferences of the National Association of Farmers Market Nutrition Programs (NAFMNP) for the past two years. "At the NAFMNP Conferences I was able to hear from states that have already

completed the transition of their FMNP programs to an EBT system,” he said. “Most states saw a significant drop in the utilization of these benefits in the first one or two years after the switch to EBT. We want to learn from their experiences to make California’s EBT transition as smooth as possible, so our farmers don’t lose out on sales and our customers continue to have access to fresh and healthy food.”

In 2025, PCFMA’s eFMNP efforts will be supported by a grant from the [California Nutrition Incentive Program](#) at CDFA’s Office of Farm to Fork. PCFMA’s grant will support outreach to and financial incentives for FMNP customers in the San Francisco Bay Area. The financial incentives will be available for FMNP customers at PCFMA’s farmers markets as well as the farmers markets operated by [Coastside Farmers Markets](#) in Half Moon Bay and Pacifica and by [Fresh Approach](#) in Richmond and East Palo Alto.

Separately, PCFMA will be providing technical support to more than 150 farmers who sell in its farmers markets, as well as to the farmers selling in the markets operated by Coastside Farmers Markets and Fresh Approach, to assist those farmers to get certified to accept the eFMNP benefits directly. The process for farmers requires an application submitted to the California Department of Public Health’s WIC Division, participation in an interactive training conducted by the state, and registration with the state’s technology provider. Once fully certified, farmers will be able to make sales to eFMNP customers, accepting their benefits using a browser-based tool on their cellphone, similar to how many already accept credit card payments.

Families who receive FMNP benefits are already enrolled in the state’s WIC program which provides monthly food benefits to low-income pregnant and nursing mothers and those with young children. The WIC benefit includes separate allotments for baby formula, dairy, grains and fruits and vegetables. The state’s eFMNP technology provider currently facilitates purchases by WIC recipients when they use their benefits at grocery stores. By using the same technology for the eFMNP transition, the state of California will make it possible for the fruit and vegetable allotment in the monthly WIC benefit to be spent at farmers markets for the first time. This is an enhancement to the FMNP program that PCFMA and other farmers markets around the state were actively advocating for.

“We know that the transition of FMNP from paper vouchers to EBT will be disruptive and there might be some farmers who are uncomfortable shifting to an electronic payment system,” said Moy. “We have encouraged the State of California to use the eFMNP transition as an opportunity to make it possible for WIC recipients to use their benefits to purchase fruit and vegetables at farmers markets because it will be an additional incentive for farmers to participate.”

The addition of WIC fruit and vegetable benefits to the FMNP benefits offers several advantages for both farmers and customers. The WIC funds are year-round and provided

monthly. FMNP benefits, however, are provided as a single disbursement usually during the summer and must be used by the end of November. Also, the WIC fruit and vegetable benefit is more than seven times larger than the FMNP benefit. Data provided by the California Department of Public Health shows that in 2024, the fruit and vegetable benefits for California WIC recipients statewide totaled around \$15.4 million. By comparison, the budget for FMNP in 2025, for both low-income families and low-income seniors combined, is around \$2 million.

Moy said that PCFMA's work to support the eFMNP transition is perfectly aligned with the organization's mission. "Our mission is to support farmers and communities by operating farmers markets," he said. "The work that we are doing to help make the eFMNP transition a success has the potential to support our farmers with additional sales and our communities with increased access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food. We believe that helping to ensure that eFMNP works is central to sustaining farmers markets for both our farmers and our customers."

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