

Agricultural Outlook Forum 1999

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## EXPANDING WIC FARMER'S MARKETS

Michael Tabor

Farmer, Licking Creek Bend Farm, Needmore, PA

Stated simply, the WIC Farmer's Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) has been the best form of Federal and State help since I started farming some 24 years ago. What it does for me as a grower of fruits and vegetables is to bring large numbers of customers at a time (August) when I'm at the peak of production but many of my regular customers are on vacation. During that period, over a third of my customers are WIC FMNP recipients. And I'm very happy to have them at my market.

For those of you who are not familiar with the program, FMNP provides \$20 worth of coupons to WIC recipients in approved states, to buy fresh produce from over 9,000 farmers across the country. In FY 1999, FMNP advocates are expecting \$15 million to be available for the program (along with 30% matching requirements for states). However, no nutrition program should be seen as part of a piecemeal approach to the greater nutrition issues facing inner city (and suburban) children today. I feel the program should be included in the larger issues of nutrition and health concerns confronting this community. So, it should examine connections with schools and general attitudes about food and eating. This conference is an ideal forum in which to raise these issues - especially if we're looking at expanding the program (something which I, as a farmer, heartily endorse!)

What I find at the Maryland and Washington D.C. area markets I sell at is a growing disinterest among inner-city customers for fresh fruits and vegetables. We need to change this attitude. What many kids tell me, when I go to speak at their schools is that their typical breakfast is candy bars, cake or sodas, rather than a nutritious school breakfast. Lunches in some cafeterias are fast food imitations... chicken, pork and fish "nuggets", pizza or hamburgers. Salads and fruits, although they are offered, are often not eaten .

Although it's no longer permissible for tobacco and alcohol products to be peddled to teens, the fast food industry bombards American children on buses, TV, movies radios and in the schools. The messages tell children that a diet rich in high cholesterol burgers, caffeine and sugar-laden soft drinks, candies, deep fried snacks, are all desirable and even cool. Some parents succumb to the pressures and give their children what they are conditioned to want to eat.

We need to send out a different message. We need to make eating a nutritious lunch at home and at school...cool!

But it's not hard to understand why many parents have little idea about what to do with fresh mustard, collard, spinach and broccoli, except to perhaps overcook them and add fatty meat by-products. Or, why bother to cook in the first place, since the kids seem to eat mostly what

comes out of the freezer or a can?

So, what to do to change WIC FMNP participants perception of a healthy diet? Here are some of my thoughts:

1. Undertake a national public education campaign coordinated with farm organizations, nutrition and health groups and USDA, aimed at showcasing fresh fruits and vegetables. Produce pro-bono ads showing Michael Jordan munching on a tomato, Celine Dion eating grapes, Madonna eating pears - all putting out the message that vegetables and fruits are sensuous, cool, and oh, even healthy!
2. At the local level, stress the use of positive male and female role models who eat healthily - teachers, coaches, sports figures, broadcasters, well-known professionals (from various local ethnic population, with whom young mothers, and children can identify).
3. That school cafeterias be showcases of healthy, tasty and nutritious local vegetables and fruits and whole grain breads, using ethnic recipes that emphasize fresh produce, and hire workers from WIC recipients as chefs and workers whenever possible. Perhaps even some of the students could participate in the preparation of the meals (in connection with school nutrition classes) and bring recipes from home. Students could be challenged to help prepare healthy, good tasting dishes which conform to the USDA food pyramid.
4. Prohibit in the schools vending machines filled with caffeine, sugar-laden (or sugar substitute) sodas, candies and snacks. Request that major vending companies offer products made with whole fruits (not 10% imported concentrates), and cold, natural, herbal teas mixed with fruit juices, lines of tasty frozen fruit sorbets on a stick (much like that available in Central and South America). Or, invite fruit farmers into the schools and during events to sell their products, along with apples, grapes and orange juices. (This could be combined with youth entrepreneurship whenever possible.)
5. That schools and government cafeterias be allowed to purchase food from local farmers - providing fresh, nutritious vegetables and salads. And that whenever possible, children be allowed to visit, participate in the harvest, and perhaps even glean donated vegetables and fruits for food banks and soup kitchens.
6. Encourage youth entrepreneurship projects as part of the program. For example, involve inner city youth with gardens, farmers, and the production of food such as applesauce, salad dressing, salsa, pesto. (Example, "Food from the Hood"). Any positive youth connection with

local sources of fruit and vegetables is a positive step.

7. That farmers who are recipients of WIC FMNP coupons be asked to volunteer a few hours during the winter season in inner-city schools in a co-ordinated program aimed at giving the kids a better understanding of the “bio-region”; promoting an awareness of the traditional relationship that once existed between the rural areas that surround cities.
8. Organize health and food fairs where WIC FMNP coupons are distributed (thereby encouraging attendance). At the fairs, gourmet chefs and FMNP representatives could demonstrate what the regional produce is and how to prepare them. Booths for diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and cancer screenings could raise the level of awareness of health issues connected to bad diets. Ethnic cooking demonstrations could show alternatives to frying (roasting, broiling, baking and boiling). And local farmers could participate, meet their potential customers and customers could learn and taste what the farmers grow.
9. And, most importantly, combine, on the federal and local levels, a multi-agency approach using the resources of labor, education, agriculture and health agencies, whenever attempting to reach out to the WIC eligible population. With the eventual goal of getting them off WIC and other programs. And, at the same time, establishing better eating patterns.

Again, I want to emphasize that this WIC Farmer’s Market program is the best thing that has come down the pike for vegetable and fruit farmers who sell their produce at direct markets. Personally, I would like to see the \$20 million FMNP request for FY2000 increased and included in a broader package aimed at encouraging a change in eating habits among our general population of school children and young mothers. If not, I believe we’ll see higher future costs for health, hospitals and social security needs as this population ages. But, as an outsider to the bureaucratic process, I can only hope that the program becomes part of that larger strategy, coordinated with other agencies, and the private sector, aimed at doing what’s in our best interest - helping the next generation to be healthy, alert, positive contributors for the future of our communities and nation.

Thank you.