



Consumers Continue to Invest in Farmers Markets, Local Food Despite Economy

By Wendy Wasserman

The most recent data available from the Agriculture Marketing Service (AMS) reported more than 4,600 farmers markets in the U.S. in August, 2008. This represented a 6.8% growth in farmers markets over the previous two years alone. In December 2008, The American Journal of Agricultural Economics published a review of research on the economic impact of farmers markets, citing statistics from annual sales of markets in Oklahoma (\$3.3 million in 2001), Iowa (\$21 million in 2004) and a positive net impact figures from West Virginia in 2005 (\$1.075 million).

These statistics certainly illustrate a positive growth trend for farmers markets and mounting evidence that the revenue generating potential for farmers markets can not, and should not, be ignored. However, these same statistics were compiled and assembled before the current economic crisis, thus begging the question if the new economic climate will rain on farmers markets' parade?

"I don't see this as bad times at all for farmers markets" says Gabrielle Langholtz, former spokesperson for New York's GreenMarket and current editor of both Edible Manhattan and Edible East End. "Factor in all the excitement about local food, and farmers markets are doing really well right now."

Don Kretschmann, an organic produce farmer in Pennsylvania agreed in a recent column for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. "The local food business is thriving – despite the 'real economy.'"

What are the factors giving farmers markets the market edge these days?

One reason could simply be that farmers markets are great for shoppers pinching their pennies. "Farmers markets have a lot of fantastic deals" says Langholtz. "The core stuff is price competitive with stores. But also in [places like] New York, even splurgy items at the market are cheaper than entrees featuring the same food for \$35 a plate at a restaurant."



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However, good deals are only part of the story. Some economists speculate that farmers markets' fortitude is more complex. One factor could be their flexibility to act and react to direct and community needs.

Micro-economist and President of Crossroads Resource Center in Minnesota, Ken Meter sees farmers markets as useful to local economies because the direct interaction between farmers and consumers is based on trust, as well as a market's ability to enhance that relationship. Because of these personal relationships, markets can quickly act, and react, to both consumer demands and vendor needs.

"Farmers markets bill themselves as being responsive to consumers as needs change. [At farmers markets] farmers negotiate directly with customers." Meter notes. "They can adjust price and adjust their product to get consumers'

On the Brink of Change

By Andrew Stout, FMC board member & co-owner of Full Circle Organic Farm in Carnation, WA

Change is in the air: A new President and administration charged with the impossible expectation to be everything for everybody; a new economy that may still not have shown its full depressive depths; a new climate in which we can only guess how the world is reacting to us; a new spectrum of technologies which open many windows yet keep us from using the real ones. It seems fitting that we also look to change who we are by what we eat.

Our relationship to food is a subject under much scrutiny. Moving well past the old paradigm of cheap eats, diet crazes, and production at all costs, the new thought centers around how we affect our health, the environment, and the economy through the simple daily decisions we make about what we eat.

Authors Michael Pollan 'In Defense of Food' and Paul Roberts 'End of Food' have been the latest to join the voices of Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, and Alice Waters to extol the virtues of real food produced with care. Radical ideas like cooking, eating locally, choosing flavor and meeting the producer are the suggested steps to a better you, and in turn, a better world. It is comforting to know that these ideas can be implemented without an act of congress or large bailout check. Simply visit your local farmers market and take time to get to know your food. What could be more empowering?

Changing the food system is best accomplished from the ground up. Growers and producers are the leaders in this new age of food. Their stories are the ones to be told and there is no better place for this to occur than at a farmers market. Nowhere else can personal relationships between growers and consumers be cultivated on a regular basis. Additionally, this dialogue is happening without intricate and expensive marketing strategies utilizing television or the Internet. It is being done directly and often, repeated across the country wherever there is a market, producers, and hungry shoppers.

That is the magic of the farmers market. By providing a space for food to exchange hands directly, economies of scale are reversed and the niche producer is exalted. This simple act of buying direct from a farmer can be all that is necessary to bring change to our broken food system. Repeated over and over in the thousands of markets throughout the country, eaters and growers are showing the way. Momentum is shifting and the nation is taking notice.

It may not be long before our country has a Food Bill instead of a Farm Bill, a Department of Food rather than a Department of Agriculture, a healthcare system that focuses on prevention, real food being cooked in our schools and antiquated notions of Old MacDonald replaced by actual farm names and farmer faces in the minds of our youth. While that day is yet to come on a grand scale, a visit to your local farmers market can give you a glimpse of what it will be like. Share this experience with your friends and family and be a part of the solution.

See you at the market!



Welcome to Wendy Wasserman

In December, FMC welcomed Wendy Wasserman as a part-time project coordinator, who is now overseeing the implementation and analysis of the state farmers market association survey. In addition to writing for *Peas n' News*, she will also help coordinate a series of webinar sessions and plan for activities associated with National Farmers Market week.

Wendy is the former publisher of *Edible Iowa River Valley*, has worked for years on national food policy issues, and is an ardent supporter of local food and farmers markets. Wendy can be contacted at wendy@farmersmarketcoalition.org.



Consumers Continue to Invest in Farmers Markets, cont'd.

needs met. Retailers and stores with big overheads and other expenses can't do that."

The flexibility inherent in farmers markets can be useful in other ways too. For instance, they can add value in comprehensive city and urban planning. When located at transportation nodes like train stops or bus depots, markets can quickly become destinations and economic stimulators at the community level. Likewise, they can also be essential elements for Main Street urban planning models where communities look towards rebuilding their economic centers using local businesses and investments.

"Farmers Markets are an anchor for local identities" says Meter. "As places to gather [economically and socially] farmers markets are very important."

Others note that farmers markets are the essence of the shop local economic stimulation argument, and therefore critical to the economic health of communities.

According to Michael Shuman, author of *The Small Mart Revolution: How Local Businesses Are Beating the Global Competition* and a leading analyst about the strength and potential of local economies, there are four basic arguments as to why buying local can offer great economic benefits. First, local businesses have a direct multiplier in the local economies and can generate more local wealth, income, and tax revenue for their home communities. Second, local businesses are more responsive, and responsible, towards with the long term plans and goals of a community. Third, local businesses are anchors for other economic development issues like tourism, creative economies, and smart growth. Finally, local businesses tend to have a smaller carbon footprint.

"Shopping at a Farmers Market is investing in something longer term for the community," says Shuman. "The arguments [for shopping at farmers markets] are the same for farmers markets as they are for toothpaste."

However, one of the primary reasons farmers markets could be continuing their momentum in the face of such dire economic times could be one of the simplest. Namely, people need to eat and they prefer to eat fresh and local. The USDA reports that 2% of consumers now do the majority of their shopping at farmers markets.

According to a recent study by the Hartman Group, a research firm focusing on consumer trends, including food and health, there continues to be "an ever expanding infatuation with 'all things local'... and a continuing – and deepening – fascination with 'all things fresh'". The Hartman Group's research suggests that "consumer's tastes and preferences are generally evolving in the direction of high quality," and the study predicts "we do not expect such evolution to be derailed by the economic tumult."

FMC Launches New Web site, First Ever Searchable Resource Library

Many FMC members may have noticed that the FMC web site seems to be in early hibernation in recent weeks. This is because, like a caterpillar, the site has undergone a metamorphosis in preparation for the release of an entirely new site in just a couple weeks. In early November, users will notice a more colorful farmersmarketcoalition.org. The Farmers Market Coalition logo, designed to represent a city center surrounded by alternating rows of food crops, has been given a facelift, and it is hoped that the new site will be both more attractive and more user-friendly.

The centerpiece of the new site will be a resource library that will be searchable by title, publisher, and keyword. With support from the Wallace Center at Winrock International, FMC has been busy collecting and uploading tools, samples, research papers, and a wealth of documents on farmers market development, operation, and governance—more than 230 altogether.

In addition to learning and sharing in the Resource Library, site visitors are invited to:

- Subscribe to the FMC e-mail listserv to connect and share with peers from around the country
- View the national Event Calendar featuring state, regional, and national workshops and conferences
- Join FMC's growing movement by becoming a member using the new on-line membership form
- Support FMC with a tax-deductible donation

FMC Web site Sub-Committee chair Jim Bingen says that the resource library will be "a real asset to the farmers market community, including farmers, market managers and everyone interested in making farmers markets better. The continued growth of the library depends upon its users, and we invite you to contribute tools and resources to share with others and to give us feedback on ways to improve the site as it grows."

Winter Farmers Markets: Extending a Season of Warmth

By Wendy Wasserman

Chicago has a robust farmers market scene. Even in January.

Indeed, between the coldest months of January and March, Chicago boasts over 30 farmers markets. Among these is the Green City Market, which just this month launched its twice-monthly indoor market at a local nature museum. Many other Chicago winter markets are sponsored by the Churches' Center for Landed People (CCLP), and are primarily held in the basements, rec. rooms and social halls of local churches. CCLP was founded in Wisconsin in the 80's to offer farmers and rural churches mutual support during the height of the farm crisis. The farmers market program started about five years ago, and organizes winter markets in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois. The model is the same in each state: participating churches offer space to the market, and convenient shopping opportunities for their parishioners. At the end of the day, the farmers make donations back to CCLP's Harvest of Hope fund which grants emergency funds to farmers and producers in crisis.

"I think of these markets as a win-win-win-win-win situation," says Robin Schirmer, Chicago area coordinator for CCLP. "They are a win for vendors, a win for congregations, a win for the environment and a win for CCLP since farmers can donate money to the crisis fund. The biggest winners by far are the consumers."

An average CCLP winter market boasts between 8-14 vendors and happens 2-3 times each weekend at different church locations. The markets usually run for about 3-4 hours during the middle of the day, and attendance usually ranges between 150-300 shoppers at each market. Beef, poultry, pork, cheese, eggs, honey, cider, preserves, vinegar and dried herb blends are some of the items usually available. Schirmer also makes an effort to have some produce at each market, like root vegetables, lettuce, chard or kale. Sometimes there are even berries. All product comes from local farmers. The produce is mostly grown in hoophouses or other creative greenhouse systems, and is often the most popular items at market.



Farmers market patrons in Boulder Colorado know they can count on some of their favorite vendors to have fresh produce at the indoor Boulder Holiday Market



Snowfall in Athens, Ohio does not deter customers or vendors at the Athens Farmers Market.

"No matter how supportive people are, they expect farmers markets to have lettuce, kale, carrots, potatoes and other produce. A little bit of [consumer] education is needed about what is available locally and seasonally" says Schirmer

Managing consumer expectations about what is realistically available is one of the biggest challenges for any off season or winter market.

"I always tell people to come early if you want something green." Says Bernie Prince of Washington, DC's FreshFarm market. "One of our biggest challenges is convincing people there's enough stuff to come for. We have to do a lot of explaining to customers what farmers are bringing and also how they are storing their product to keep it fresh."

FreshFarm market manages 8 farmers markets in the greater DC area during prime season. They started extending one of their most popular markets in downtown Washington into a winter market about seven years ago and have plans to add another winter market next year.

"We've seen phenomenal growth," reports Prince. "Last year we had about 12-17 vendors per winter market. This year, we are seeing 30-32."

Like CCLP markets, Prince is noticing that farmers and vendors are becoming more eager to participate in winter markets because more of them are discovering creative ways to extend their season, and consequently, their cash flow. "We're seeing more people doing seasonal adaptations with value added products, like taking the ripe tomatoes

from the summer and making them into something jarred to be sold over the winter," notes Prince. "There are also more producers experimenting with hoop houses and high tunnels."

But Prince believes the real incentive for vendors to participate in winter markets is shorter market hours and more reliable and consistent annual income. "The benefit [for winter markets] to farmers is cash flow. They get the money now to pay bills instead of waiting for prime season."

Prince recognizes that winter markets are only as successful as the organization and thought put into them. In DC, signage goes up for nearly three months before the winter market season begins announcing the off season market. Farmers and producers who are staying on through the winter season hand out fliers to all their customers. FreshFarm does a regular newsletter and email blasts announcing the extended season. The vendors also alter their table displays with fuller tents, auxiliary lights, portable heaters and extra blankets to keep themselves and their produce warm.

Sales seem to indicate the efforts pay off. According to Prince, the first two years of the winter market in DC saw a consistent growth of about 15-19% per year. Last year, the market exploded with a 65% growth in sales. She also estimates about 1500 people come through the 3 hour market each week.

"We see regulars from our other [high season] markets as well as hard core customers. On bad weather days, sales are even stronger because shoppers are feeling bad for the farmers and so appreciative they've come out." Prince says.

Although smaller in scope, size and sales than FreshFarm in DC or CCLP in Chicago, the Dubuque winter market in northeast Iowa is an equally successful model of an off season market. Held in a Bingo Hall, the Dubuque winter market attracts an average of 32 vendors and 200 shoppers each week. But the challenges are the same: confirming that vendors and customers show up, making sure that customers know what to expect at market, and being wary of extreme winter weather.

"The farmers market is really important to us," says Amy Weber, the Dubuque winter market master. "We don't have an organic food store, but we have a large resource [and demand] for local food."

According to the USDA, 16% of farmers markets have operating days between November and March, with the number poised to grow due to rising demand and improved season extension methods. And it's that demand and innovation which makes even the darkest and coldest days at any winter market feel warm.

FMC Plans Activities for National Farmers Market Week

Last year, National Farmers Market Week (NFMW) was proclaimed the first week in August for the foreseeable future, which affords state and individual markets advance notice to plan their promotions farther in advance and consequently have a greater impact in communicating a positive message about farmers markets. The Farmers Market Coalition, with support from the Agricultural Marketing Service, is presently working on some unique promotional materials to help individual markets reach more customers and leverage the national and local exposure of NFMW to communicate the variety of positive impacts of farmers markets.

While the FMC's Marketing and Public Relations Committee is still working on the details of this first-of-its-kind campaign, we need your help to make it a success. In response to a quick membership poll taken during the 2008 Farmers Market Week, the campaign will feature press release templates and consumer education tools designed to help markets reach second-tier consumers and potential community partners by answering the question, "What's so special about farmers markets?" To make these tools useful and widely available, please lend us a hand by sending us your local media contact lists as well as any data collected in your area that demonstrates the values offered by farmers markets (e.g. price comparisons, farmland preservation case studies, behavioral change data from nutrition education projects, etc.).

Stay tuned for more detail about how FMC can help you leverage National Farmers Market Week to gain maximum positive exposure for markets in your region!

Mark Your Calendar: FMC Member Meeting March 20th

Members in good standing as of March 1st will be eligible to participate in the 2009 Farmers Market Coalition member meeting, which will be held in a live on-line format on Friday, March 20th (National Agriculture Day) at 12 p.m. Eastern. In addition to an executive report and reports from each of the board's committees, agenda topics will include National Farmers Market Week, FMC's upcoming professional development webinar series, and other project activities planned for the rest of the year. Members will be given the exact time and log-in directions for the meeting in February.

To make sure your membership is up to date, log in on-line and, while you're there, check to make sure your contact information is up-to-date! Learn more about National Agriculture Day at www.agday.org.

Invest in the Coalition This Year

The FMC has just finalized revisions to its position paper, which provides an overview of federal programs which support farmers markets and some recommendations for programs in need of additional resources. The four page document is available on-line at www.farmersmarketcoalition.org/joinus/policy.

Our efforts to communicate to policy makers and potential partners are only possible with your support and input. Visit FMC's new web site to learn more about membership, or about making a tax-deductible donation that supports the coalition's grassroots movement to strengthen farmers markets.

FMC Welcomes New Friends

The FMC would like to welcome its newest "Friend of Farmers Markets" Business Supporter, Farmers Markets Today (www.farmersmarketstoday.com). Individuals can also become Friends of Farmers Market and support FMC. If you'd like to become a Friend of Farmers Markets at the individual or business level, visit the FMC web site at www.farmersmarketcoalition.org/membership/levels.

Contributions to the FMC are tax-deductible to the full extent of IRS 501(c)(3) law.

GSA: A New Good Neighbor for Farmers Markets

By Wendy Wasserman

Looking for space to start or relocate a farmers market in your city or town? While farmers markets are particularly creative in establishing in-kind partnerships for affordable and strategic locations, sometimes high real estate prices and parking limitations make the ideal central location unfeasible. A federal government program you may have never heard might be able to help.

The General Service Administration (GSA) is the agency that manages more than 8,000 properties owned and leased by the federal government, including more than 2,000 in urban communities. Via the GSA's Urban Development/Good Neighbor Program, the GSA fosters local partnerships, public use of its real estate holdings, and supports community based urban development.

Part of the Urban Development/Good Neighbor Program is to make federal spaces available to farmers markets where and when feasible. Rents are designed to be either free, or very low, and the locations are often very desirable. One example of how farmers markets can work at a GSA managed property is at the USDA building in DC, which hosts successful regular season and off-season farmers markets.

The first step in finding out if there is an appropriate property near you is by searching the GSA Inventory of Owned and Leased Properties at www.gsa.gov/iolp. If you find something you may be interested in, contact the GSA's Office of the Architect at 202-501-1888 or on-line at www.gsa.gov/goodneighbor. From there, the Good Neighbor Program staff can walk you through the next steps.

Considering that Farmers' Market Today magazine reports that over 40% of farmers markets are in downtown business districts, the federal government could be a good neighbor indeed.

Hats off to FMC Volunteers

It goes without saying that the FMC is made possible due to investment of donated time, energy, and inspiration on the part of its seventeen volunteer leaders on the board of directors, but there are also other volunteers that share their time and skills to help us achieve our mission of strengthening farmers markets. This winter, we'd like to offer a special thanks to the following folks who've donated time and skills to help our organization grow:

Tiffany Wilson, Mary Wennerstrum, Patricia Miller, Joseph Donahue, and Mike Lee

If you'd like to learn more about volunteer opportunities that might fit your schedule, skills, and interests, send an e-mail to work@farmersmarketcoalition.org, or visit us at:

www.farmersmarketcoalition.org/supportus/volunteer.



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