Farmers’ Motivations to Adopt Nutrition Incentive and Farm to School Programs

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Poster #14309: Farmers’ Motivations to Adopt Nutrition Incentive and Farm to School Programs

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Background

Benefits and Challenges of Local Food Systems
- Recently, farmers and consumers have become increasingly interested in selling and buying food within a local system.
- While not always a given when buying “local”, local food systems may have economic, social/community, and environmental impacts.
- Local markets can be challenging for farmers and not uniformly affordable and accessible to all consumers.

Importance of Study
- Farmers’ market nutrition incentive (FMNI) and farm to school (F2S) programs support farmers while lessening the burden of local food access for lower income and at-risk populations.
- Limited generalizable evidence describes the benefits of participating in FMNI and F2S programs from the perspective of producers, and that which exists is specific to certain geographical contexts or time periods.

Methods & Analysis

Objective: To better understand fruit/vegetable farmers’ perceptions on the adoption and impacts of FMNI and F2S.

Survey Development: Using the Diffusion of Innovations theory as a foundation, our survey focused specifically on:
1. Perceptions of FMNI and F2S as defined by the four DI theory attributes
2. Experienced or perceived barriers to program adoption; and
3. Reported impacts of program adoption.

Survey questions were based on previously validated instruments and adapted to meet our research objective.

Fifteen expert reviewers provided content validity feedback, followed by pilot testing by 13 farmers.

Survey Sample and Administration: The study utilized a cross-sectional design to survey fruit and vegetable farmers in the Mid-Atlantic region (Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia, and the District of Columbia) during February and March 2017. Farmers had to meet the following inclusion criteria:
- Produced and sold fruits or vegetables for human consumption in 2016.
- Willing to either participate in or consider participating in the FMNI or F2S programs at current operation.
- Participated or considered participating in the FMNI and/or F2S programs at current operation.

Snowball sampling was used at Mid-Atlantic producer conferences (Pennsylvania Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) and the West Virginia Small Farms Conference (WVSFC)), and through stakeholder references to the Mid-Atlantic region with access to the population of interest. Surveys were self-administered by respondents via Qualtrics.

Statistical Analysis: Means and standard deviations were calculated for each DI theory variable, and t-tests corrected for unequal variance were utilized to compare adopters and non-adopters on each program. The barrier for FMNI sales to schools, and other F2S activities were calculated and ranked based on the percent of respondents indicating that an item was a major barrier. Each suggested economic, social/community, and environmental factor was reverse coded and totaled. Then the top three factors in each category were selected based on their total score. The significance level was set at p < .05 for all analyses. All analyses were conducted using Stata SE, version 14.2 (2017, StataCorp LC).

Results & Discussion

Results
- Respondents included 136 FMNI and 42 F2S current participants, with a total sample size of 155. Beyond what is shown in the tables, most respondents were female (57.4%), white (87.1%) and non-Hispanic (91.6%).

Key Findings:
- Adoption of both FMNI and F2S programs were found to be more advantageous than non-adopters, specifically related to social and market opportunities.
- Most substantial barriers were issues with product pricing, customer engagement, program logistics, and administration.
- Social/community impacts were seen as a driving factor for farmers, with approximately 75% of respondents ranking those impacts as most important.

Implications

Knowing that FMNI and F2S programs strive to alleviate local food system inequities and provide more diversified markets for farmers, the findings from this study can inform program design and implementation and in recruiting additional FMNI and F2S adopters. This study also provides evidence about the importance of programs like FMNI and F2S for American’s farmers. Federal legislative and funding support is essential to ensure that these programs continue successfully. Strengthening state and local contracting/bidding policies to minimize local food procurement barriers and supporting an increase in school meal reimbursement amounts will enhance school ability to buy from local farms. Building on the results of this and prior studies, future research related to FMNI and F2S programs is needed to capture longitudinal impacts on the local economy, child and community health outcomes, and community food security.


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