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# Redeeming WIC Benefits at California Farmers' Markets

by Patrick McLaughlin



Participants in USDA's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) can redeem two types of WIC benefits at farmers' markets for fruits and vegetables. The WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) provides eligible WIC

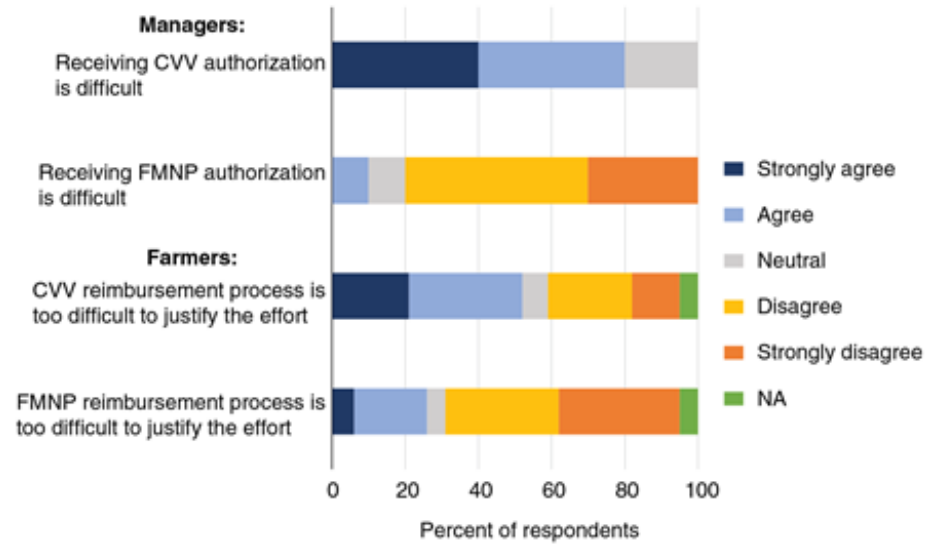
participants in participating State agencies with benefits valued between \$10-30 per year to be spent exclusively at farmers' markets. In addition, WIC participants receive paper cash value vouchers (CWs) and/or electronic cash value benefits (CVBs). These CW/Bs can be used to purchase fruit and vegetables at stores authorized to accept WIC benefits, and 28 WIC State agencies allow CWs to be used at authorized farmers' markets. As of summer 2017, CW/B values are \$11 per month for pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women and \$8 per month for children.

The vast majority of CWs are redeemed at stores, not farmers' markets. In California—the largest State WIC program in the Nation—participants redeemed \$73,000 of the \$87.6 million worth of CW benefits at local farmers' markets in 2014. To identify barriers impeding CW redemption at farmers' markets in California, researchers analyzed CW redemption data for the State from June 2014 to February 2015. The researchers also conducted surveys of managers and farmers at 20 of the 36 farmers' markets in California authorized to redeem CWs during this period. The 20 surveyed markets accepted both CWs and FMNP benefits. California farmers' market managers and farmers both reported that CWs present more challenges than the benefits issued through FMNP.

Eighty percent of farmers' market managers surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that obtaining authorization from the California WIC State agency to accept CWs is difficult compared with only 10 percent saying the same about the FMNP. Similar sentiments prevailed among farmers regarding the relative difficulty of receiving reimbursement from the State agency for CWs. The relative dissatisfaction appears to stem from higher relative administrative burden, such as greater training requirements for the CW authorization, complex reimbursement processes, and tighter windows for voucher redemptions.

When California WIC participants patronized farmers' markets, they redeemed higher proportions of the value of their CWs than at stores: the researchers found that the chance of a participant redeeming a CW for the full value in California is nearly 100 percent at a farmers' market compared with 66.8 to 85.6 percent at grocery stores of different sizes and formats. Adding fruit and vegetables to a purchase during checkout to reach the full CW value may be more easily done at farmers' markets potentially explaining the larger share of the CW value that was redeemed at farmers' markets.

Farmers' market managers and farmers in California report WIC CVVs present greater challenges than FMNP benefits



CVV = cash value voucher for fruit and vegetables from USDA's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).  
FMNP = USDA's WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program.  
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from surveys conducted in 2014 of farmers' market managers and farmers authorized to redeem CVVs and FMNP benefits in the California WIC Program.

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**This article is drawn from...**

“Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program Redemptions at California Farmers’ Markets: Making the Program Work for Farmers and Participants,” by Tina L. Saitone and Patrick W. McLaughlin, Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems, May 02, 2017

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