

AB 537 THE HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS AND AVAILABILITY ACT
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Summary

In the late 1990's USDA switched from paper food stamps to electronic benefits transfers (EBT) rendering certified farmers' markets inaccessible to individuals and families receiving public assistance.

Specifically AB 537 reestablishes access for our most vulnerable and needy populations to high quality fruits and vegetables by requiring open air markets, including Certified Farmer's Markets to be equipped with and utilized EBT systems by 2012 or allow an FNS certified non-profit to assist in the facilitation of EBT at their market.

Background

When the USDA food stamp program became electronic and replaced paper food stamps with EBT cards, they in effect removed the ability of those receiving public assistance to access locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables. Instantly a digital divide was created between farmers' markets and EBT participants.

Since the switch some farmers' markets and non-profit organizations have made the effort to invest in the appropriate technology in order to offer EBT at the point of sale. But nearly ten years after the USDA made the digital switch to EBT only a fraction of certified farmers' markets have the capability.

There are an estimated 540 certified farmers' markets operating in California, not including other open air markets. However, only 118 locations throughout the State accept EBT. This translates to a dismal statistic- Only 21% of farmers' markets accept EBT.

The benefits of EBT users having access to Farmers' Markets are considerable. The number one reason is quality of life. Access to fresh-picked, vine and tree-ripened quality produce promotes good health and healthy eating habits. Cost is also a factor. The cost to value ratio of produce sold at farmers market often far exceeds that of produce sold in a store.

Communities benefit from Farmers' Markets in

many ways. The meeting of farmers and consumers serves as an educational experience whereby customers learn about their food sources, have access to nutritional information, engage in a multi-cultural experience, and become aware of agricultural issues.

Purpose

AB 537 will allow families receiving food assistance to once again access the fresh fruits and vegetables they need and want by reconnecting them to local producers and growers.

Access to fresh healthy food is important for everyone, particularly those with limited incomes that struggle to put food on the table. Certified farmers' markets are the best way to access fresh locally-grown food from local producers.

As the economic recession takes its toll, more and more Americans are turning to food assistance to be able to feed themselves and their families. Farmers' markets are the intersection of food production and consumption, a place that should be accessible to everyone.

This bill will not only nourish the hungry but also support the viability of small farmers and farmers' markets throughout California.

Supporters: (Partial List)

California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation
Center for Community Advocacy
Community Alliance with Family Farmers
Agricultural Land Based Training Association
First Five- Fresno
Western Center on Law and Poverty
SEE-LA
City and County of San Francisco
Urban & Environmental Policy Institute
Roots of Change
County Welfare Directors Association
Consumer Federation of California
Jericho
California Immigrant Policy Center

Opposition:

Individual Farmers Markets