

WIC fresh produce in the works

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By Joan Obra / The Fresno Bee

Central San Joaquin Valley fruit and vegetable farmers, how would you like to get a piece of \$80 million or more?

I bet that just made a lot of people sit up. The money comes from changes to the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) food packages that start at the beginning of October. For the first time, low-income mothers and children will receive monthly vouchers to buy fresh produce. (If fresh fruits and vegetables are not available, the vouchers also will pay for canned and frozen fruits and vegetables.) Nursing mothers will receive \$10, while non-nursing new mothers and pregnant women will get \$8. Children 1-5 also receive \$6 every month.

The shift could mean an estimated \$7 million annually for the Valley's (and Mariposa County's) numerous fruit and vegetable growers -- if they take advantage of the new rules. For example, the WIC office in Fresno serves more than 33,000 mothers and children every month.

Of course, not all the vouchers get used. But officials hope a campaign to boost healthy eating increases voucher use, says Laurie True, executive director of the California WIC Association, a nonprofit that supports WIC.

How can farmers tap into the money? They can contact WIC-Only stores, the shops that sell only WIC products. Come October, federal law will require these stores -- and any others that take WIC vouchers -- to stock at least two types of fruits and vegetables.

"That's where the moms shop," True says about the WIC-Only stores. Since they've never had to sell most fruits and vegetables before, "it's a challenge for them to start stocking the fresh produce."

But these stores also represent new markets for small farmers. "They're going to buy more produce there than at a farmers market," True says.

While she's right, it's still a good idea to promote using the vouchers at farmers markets. It's an idea that's taken root in Fresno -- but still hasn't been finalized at the state level.

The Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission is forging ahead anyway. By April, it aims to launch a farmers market next to the WIC office in downtown Fresno's Mariposa Mall.

It's a terrific vision: Participating families, who sometimes don't have a car, would have a convenient place to shop for healthy food after picking up their vouchers at the WIC office. And small farmers would benefit from the sales. To support the project, the commission has \$53,000 in grant money from the U.S. Department of Agriculture farmers market promotion program. Some of the money will be used for other projects, but much of it is for this new one, says Blong Lee, a program manager at the commission.

Ideally, the commission would like to have more than this to sustain the market, but it can't wait. The state will likely create a pilot program for farmers markets redeeming the new fruit-and-vegetable vouchers, and it wants to be ready for it.

At least one high-profile supporter is cheering on the project. Gus Schumacher, a former undersecretary of agriculture for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services at the USDA, is a longtime supporter of small farms. "California will have \$80-\$90 million available for more than 1 million WIC mothers and children," says Schumacher, now a consultant to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's food and society initiative. "It would be wonderful for that to go to as many small farmers as possible."

In an area such as ours, where fruit-and-vegetable farming is a cornerstone of our economy, I couldn't agree more.

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