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50 farmers' markets in Illinois to receive federal grant funds

CARBONDALE – July 24, 2012. Thanks to a federal grant, the number of farmers' markets in Illinois that accept Link, debit and credit cards could double, Lt. Governor Sheila Simon, a local food advocate and chair of the Governor's Rural Affairs Council, announced today.

Simon said 41 farmers' markets across Illinois each will receive $1,200 grants from the Illinois Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) Wireless Project. Due to popular demand, additional applications will be accepted on a first-come, first-serve basis.

The program will enable farmers' markets to accept Illinois Link cards, which access federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, wirelessly for the first time. A total of 49 SNAP-certified farmers' markets and direct-marketing farmers accepted Link cards in 2011, according to the United States Department of Agriculture, up from 15 in 2009. The wireless EBT project could bring the total to 99, or about one-third of farmers' markets statewide, by this year's end.

"We expect sales of local foods across Illinois, from urban gardens in Chicago to farms in

Alexander County, to increase because of this program. Health benefits will follow," Simon said. "As a state, we export more than 95 percent of our food dollars. Doubling the number of farmers' markets accepting Link, debit and credit cards will keep more of those dollars in local communities, while improving the health of our citizens and underserved neighborhoods, at no new cost to state taxpayers."

The wireless EBT project, funded by a grant from the USDA, aims to expand access to fresh produce for low-income residents and boost sales of local foods. The program will be administered by the Illinois Department of Human Services and the Illinois Department of Agriculture with support from the Lt. Governor's office.

The funding is part of a $4 million nationwide effort by the USDA to increase SNAP use at farmers' markets. SNAP sales at Illinois farmers' markets totaled nearly $70,000 in 2011, an increase of over 522 percent since 2009.

"We're excited to have this opportunity to improve opportunities for low-income individuals to obtain nutritious foods and to support local farmers," said USDA Food and Nutrition Service Administrator Audrey Rowe. "SNAP participation at farmers' markets helps provide fresh fruit and vegetables to families and expands the customer base for local farmers - a win-win for agriculture and local communities."

Simon and Rowe will host a media call-in at 1 p.m. today with Connie Spreen, the executive director of the Chicago not-for-profit Experimental Station, and vegetable farmers, Cheryl and Josh Dotson, of Dotson Farms in Beecher. The mother-son team, along with Josh's wife, Bonnie, sells produce at several farmers' markets in Chicago.

Dotson Farms began selling at farmers' markets in 1979, when the operation was owned by Josh's grandparents. Today the Dotsons sell a variety of tomatoes, peppers, watermelon, cantaloupe, sweet corn and 30 other kinds of vegetables at three SNAP-certified farmers' markets in Chicago: Lincoln Square Farmers Market, Division Street Farmers Market and Pullman Farmers Market.

Since those markets began accepting Link, Josh Dotson has seen sales of his produce increase five percent at Lincoln Square and Division Street, and nearly 10 percent at Pullman

which is in a low-income neighborhood situated in what is known as a food desert, or an area without easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

“Our farm has been selling at farmers’ markets for many years, but we gained access to a whole new set of customers when they began accepting Link cards,” Dotson said. “As a family farm, every new customer makes a difference.”

The 41 farmers’ markets that have been selected are located in 22 different counties across Illinois and range from large operations with nearly 100 vendors and artisans to tiny ventures with less than five farmers selling produce. These markets must obtain certification to accept SNAP benefits through the USDA Food and Nutrition service and sign a contract with the Illinois Department of Agriculture that requires disclosure of sales data, use of the wireless machine on all market days, and participation in required trainings, before seeking reimbursement from the program.

Participating markets will be able to keep the wireless EBT machines, but must absorb the wireless service costs after the project is complete in September 2013 or when their $1,200 grant is expended. Minimal customer service and transaction fees will not be reimbursed by the grant. Markets that are already certified and own an EBT machine can seek reimbursement as long as their certification and EBT purchase happened after November 18, 2011.

“With 1 in 7 Illinoisans currently receiving SNAP benefits, increasing the availability of EBT machines at farmers’ markets makes so much sense: SNAP customers will gain access to the healthiest foods, and potentially millions of SNAP dollars will be redirected toward local agricultural producers, enabling them to invest in and grow their businesses,” Spreen said.

Grant recipients will be provided community kits developed by the Lt. Governor’s office and the Illinois Department of Agriculture that will include training and promotional materials including an EBT implementation guide that explains SNAP regulations, how to use an EBT machine and ways to partner with community organizations to increase the sustainability of a wireless EBT program.

Markets will be required to attend one of three regional trainings that will be held in late August and led by Experimental Station and the Illinois Farmers Market Association. These trainings

will be open to any farmers' market in Illinois that would like to attend. An online presentation will be provided for markets unable to attend one of the trainings in person.

Upon completion of the program, Southern Illinois University Carbondale will use monthly sales data and market surveys to study and measure the impact wireless EBT machines and SNAP accessibility have on overall sales at farmers' markets and will release findings at the end of 2013 or early 2014.

Additional applications for the Illinois EBT Wireless Project will be accepted on a first-come, first-serve basis. For more information, or to apply, visit www.agr.state.il.us or call 217-524-9129.

Illinois EBT Wireless Project Participants

Abundant Market – Tuscola Downtown Farmers Market (Tuscola)

Alton Farmers' and Artisans' Market (Alton)

Aurora Farmers Market East (Aurora)

Bartlett Farmers Market (Bartlett)

Bureau County Farmers Market (Princeton)

Carbondale Community Friday Night Fairs (Carbondale)

Central Park Farmers Market (Decatur)

City of Mendota Farmer's Market (Mendota)

Clark County Farmers Market (Martinsville)

Clinton Area Farmers and Artisans Market (Clinton)

Deerfield Farmers Market (Deerfield)

DeKalb Farmers' Market (DeKalb)

Discover Sycamore's Farmers Market (Sycamore)

Elmwood Park Farmers Market (Elmwood Park)

F.R.E.S.H. Farmers Market (East St. Louis)

French Market (Villa Park)

George Washington Carver Farmers Market (Chicago)

Haymarket Square Park Farmers Market (Dixon)

Hinsdale Farmers Market (Hinsdale)

Hopkins Park/Pembroke Farmers' Market (Pembroke Township)

Huntley Farmers Market (Huntley)

La Grange Farmers Market (La Grange)

Lincoln Square Thursday Evening Farmers Market (Chicago)

Lockport Farmer's Market (Lockport)

Loyola Farmers Market (Chicago)

Main Street Farmers Market of Olney (Olney)

Morton Grove Farmers' Market (Morton Grove)

Northbrook Farmers Market (Northbrook)

Old Capitol Farmers Market (Springfield)

Oswego Country Market (Oswego)

Palos Heights Farmers Market (Palos Heights)

Portage Park Farmers Market (Chicago)

Ravinia's Farmers Market (Chicago)

Ridgeville Farmers' Market (Evanston)

Seaway Bank Farmers Market (Chicago)

Shelbyville Farmers Market (Shelbyville)

Skokie's Farmers Market (Skokie)

The Land of Goshen Community Market (Edwardsville)

Trinity United Church of Christ Farmers Market (Chicago)

Twin City Market (Sterling)

Uptown Farmers Market at Weiss Memorial Hospital (Chicago)

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