

**NAFMNP**

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FARMERS' MARKET NUTRITION PROGRAMS

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**Statement**

By

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National Association of Farmers'  
Market Nutrition Programs

Presented to

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture,  
Nutrition & Forestry  
Thad Cochran, Chairman

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*Cultivating opportunities for consumers to buy fresh produce from local growers*

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Chairman Cochran and members of the Committee. I want to thank you for giving our Association the opportunity to participate in this hearing on child nutrition programs and the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act.

Mr. Chairman, my name is Don Wambles. I am the Administrator of the State of Alabama Farmers Marketing Authority, and I am serving this year as president of the National Association of Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs. Our national association represents 37 states, Guam, Puerto Rico, and 5 Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) that operate WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs and 36 Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs.

These programs meet two very important objectives. They provide fresh produce to women, infants, children, and seniors by giving them coupons with which to buy fresh fruits and vegetables from small farmers who qualify and participate in the FMNP and increase income to small family farmers by increasing use and awareness of farmers' markets.

Nationally, upwards of 2.7 million WIC clients and seniors buy safe and healthy domestically grown vegetables and fruits from more than 14,400 farmers at more than 2,000 community-based farmers' markets, farm stands, and CSAs (Community-Supported Agriculture Programs).

Mr. Chairman, your state has two WIC FMNP programs—one operated by the MS Department of Agriculture & Commerce and the other by the Mississippi Band of Choctaws. The Choctaw program began in 1995 serving a single farmers' market, eleven farmers, and just over 1,000 recipients. This program today serves eight farmers' markets, 24 producers and more than 1,100 recipients.

The second Mississippi program was started in 1998 under the leadership of Agriculture Commissioner Lester Spell. That first year, 3 farmers markets and 17 small farmers participated, and almost 3,500 WIC recipients received coupons. This past year, this program was offered in 7 farmers markets; 35 farmers participated; and nearly 7,500 recipients received coupons.

The Mississippi programs are small by comparison to many, but they are representative of every single program in the country. These programs create a lasting link between small farmers and thousands of low-income women and children who receive coupons to buy fresh vegetables and fruits. The FMNP educates WIC clients and seniors about the importance of fresh fruits and vegetables. It changes eating habits for the better. This program also generates sales for small farmers. Last year, farmers received about \$40 million from coupons redeemed in both of our programs.

I don't have to expound on all the research that shows the benefits of good child nutrition. I will let the nutrition experts handle that. What I do know is that we deliver nutritious fruits and vegetables to children and dollars to farmers as efficiently as possible, with the added benefit of exposing young mothers to the stable family environment provided by small family farmers.

This program is more than just giving a recipient \$20 in coupons. It provides nutrition education, assistance when shopping at a farmers market, and help in how to prepare products

when they return home. This is a big change from buying fast food, or buying something ready to eat. Learning to shop for fresh vegetables and to prepare them takes time and effort, therefore those of us who have the necessary knowledge must spend the time and energy to teach those who do not, whether young or old.

I would like to thank Congress for its strong and continuing support for the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. This is the only program that provides direct benefits to small farmers and low-income families with so little effort. Unlike a lot of government programs, neither is considered an entitlement program, a welfare program, or even a subsidy to large corporate farmers. The FMNPs provide fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables to low-income women, children and the elderly, and they also provide much needed income to thousands of small family farmers. I don't need to remind this committee that these farmers spend their dollars in their local communities, thus promoting local economic development. These programs are a win-win for the country.

This program was funded last year and again this year at \$25 million. Candidly, this has been sufficient funding for applicants to date, but there's a reason why this is so. As state budgets have tightened, it has been increasingly more difficult to find the necessary dollars to provide the required 30 percent state match for this program. While I believe that states should provide some commitment or stake in these programs, the current economic conditions have made it very tough on many states to accomplish this. We have even had states that have had very successful, established programs simply drop out of the program because they could not provide the match.

How do you explain that to a farmer or a child? I know of nothing more frustrating than to establish a program, build interest and enthusiasm in it, and grow it only to see the program end because of state budget crises.

Our association would ask that you consider changing the state match requirements so that states could continue to operate this very important program. The states' match (30% of the total federal grant) is not in line with other food assistance programs. *The Farmers' Market Nutrition Program is the only nutrition program that must provide state match dollars for the federal food funds.* This simply is not fair; it has been and continues to be an obstacle to program growth within states and limits expansion to new states. The FMNP should only be required to match the administrative portion of the Federal funds, just like other nutrition programs.

We would also ask Congress to examine the amount of federal dollars we can give a recipient. This has been capped at \$20 for the past ten years. This is the only program that I know of that hasn't had inflation. It is simple math. Fertilizer costs have increased; labor costs have increased; equipment costs have increased. It makes sense to give recipients more coupons to buy fresh produce that costs more today than ten years ago. I can't explain the logic behind that reasoning to WIC recipients or to the farmers that utilize my markets. It is important for this issue to be addressed this year. It is also reasonable to say that the coupon maximum should be increased to \$30.

Another issue that should be considered is the requirement that limits farmer participation to only those farmers who operate at farmers' markets. While we want to

see this program continue to be used to strengthen local markets, we also want the flexibility to address local situations where markets are neither abundant nor available. There are states and pockets within states that do not have sufficient markets for their farmers, and those farmers should be able to participate in this program.

While this hearing is focused on WIC reauthorization, we want to talk briefly about the Seniors Farmers Market Program. This program is a sister program to the WIC FMNP. It has been phenomenally successful, even though it is in its infancy. The USDA Food & Nutrition Service has been exemplary in their effort to work creatively on the Seniors' program. They have done a tremendous job in getting this program off the ground.

It has been so successful that the demand for the program has far exceeded the available dollars allocated by the Farm Bill. While \$15 million was allocated, states' applications exceeded \$28 million. This program will continue to grow, provided that Congress—through the appropriations committees—add the necessary dollars so that all states that have applied for programs will be funded.

Mr. Chairman, no one in America should go hungry. I would like to put a face on these two programs. I recently witnessed a young WIC mother with her son purchasing produce with WIC FMNP coupons. When the mother handed the bag of vegetables to her child, he stated with excitement, "Mama, are we going to have something to eat tonight?" The expression on that child's face and his words are embedded in my mind forever.

I also recently talked to an elderly gentleman at one of our markets about the Seniors FMNP. He stated that it was a blessing to him. He did not have sufficient income to shop at the farmers market otherwise. I could not help but notice his cap. It was a World War II veteran cap. He wore that cap and talked about his service to the country with pride. He is just one example of the many veterans that are being served through the Seniors' FMNP. I cannot forget what their service has provided for us. At-risk children, young mothers, and seniors benefit from both the WIC and Seniors' Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. Lifestyles are changed. Bonds between recipients and small farmers are being established every day.

Yes, we strongly encourage you to make legislative changes that strengthen and expand both the WIC FMNP and the Seniors' FMNP. Our association stands ready to work with you and your staff and with USDA staff to make this happen.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer this testimony. I'll be happy to respond to your questions.

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