



WSFMA FARMERS MARKET FOOD ACCESS FORUM

SUMMARY FOR NOV. 9, 2023

e-FMNP Recap of the 2023 Season and Plans for 2024

By Colleen Donovan, WSFMA
info@wafarmersmarkets.org
Nov. 11, 2023

PRESENTER

Katherine D. Flores, Farmers Market Nutrition Program Lead
Office of Nutrition Services
Washington State Department of Health
Katherine.Flores@doh.wa.gov
360-236-3771
www.doh.wa.gov/you-and-your-family/wic/farmers-market



TERMS

- FMNP: Farmers Market Nutrition Program
- Growers: Fruit, vegetable, herb, and/or honey producers who apply to and are authorized to receive FMNP benefits.
- SFMNP: Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program which offers a benefit of \$80 per farmers market season to low-income seniors.
- WA FMNP Team: includes staff from DOH (Department of Health) who manage WIC FMNP and overall administration of FMNP, and DSHS (Department of Social and Health Services) which manages Senior FMNP.
- WIC: Its full name is the “Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.”
- WIC FMNP: This is a benefit of \$28 per farmers market season for eligible participants in the WIC program who “opt in” to receive them. Up to 3 participants per household can receive WIC FMNP.
- WSFMA: Washington State Farmers Market Association

WHY DID FMNP CHANGE TO ELECTRONIC BENEFITS?

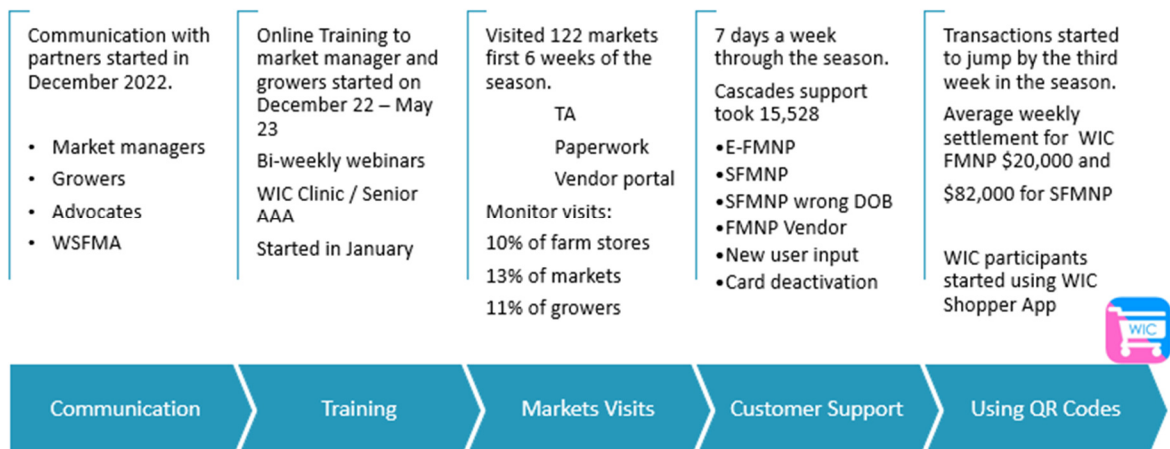
In 2021, nationwide, banks that contracted with the FMNP to print and process the \$4.00 checks announced that 2022 would be the last season they would offer that service. Every state with a FMNP program was required to find alternate providers or transition to in-house check/coupon processing. Currently, there are many different models that states are trying to implement.

In Washington State, the FMNP Team at the Department of Health decided to transition to an electronic benefit and identified a provider to support WIC FMNP, Senior FMNP, and the WIC Fruit and Vegetable Benefits redemptions at farmers markets and farm stands (what FMNP calls “farm stores”).

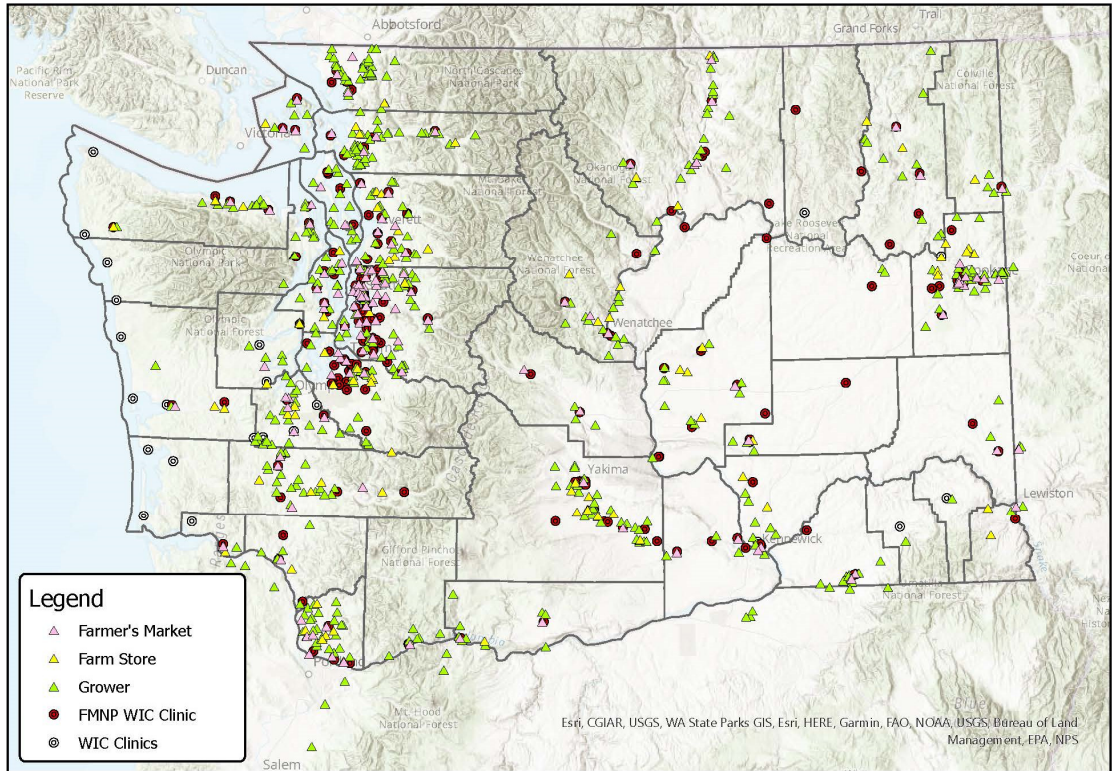
The WA FMNP Team decided to make the full transition to electronic benefits in 2023 rather than taking an incremental approach.

WHAT HAPPENED IN 2023?

The FMNP Team worked with a range of partners in the planning and implementation process, including DOH, DSHS, local WIC agencies and clinics, Area Agencies on Aging (AAA’s), Farmers Markets, growers, WA SNAP-Ed, and the WSFMA.



MAP of FMNP IN 2023



Source: WSDOH, Nov. 7, 2023

FMNP PARTICIPATION by YEAR

The number of authorized farmers markets as held steady from 2021 to 2023 and increased by one farmers market in 2023. Farmers markets are authorized to participate in FMNP on three-year cycles. All farmers markets are required to apply now for a new three-year cycle, 2024 to 2026.

The number of authorized farm stores declined from 88 in 2022 to 83 in 2023, a 17% decrease.

The number of growers authorized to accept FMNP at farmers markets held steady at 572; however, the number that were able to accept transactions decreased by 94 or 16% between 2022 and 2023.

FNMP Authorized Participants	2021	2022	2023
Farmers Markets	131	135	136
Farm Stores	82	88	83
Growers	641	573	479*

Source: WSDOH, Nov. 7, 2023

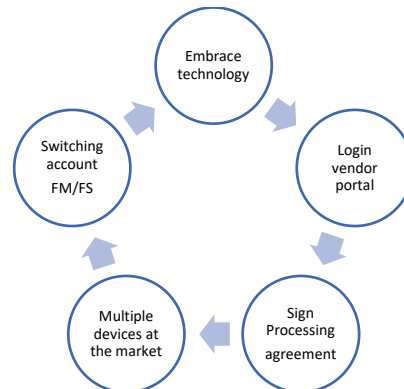
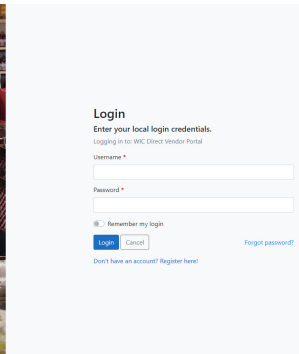
* A total of 572 growers submitted their applications to become authorized to accept FMNP in 2023. A total of 479 growers are authorized and set up to take transactions using the Vendor Portal. An additional 90 growers are still working through the process to use the Vendor Portal.

PROCESS FOR GROWERS

Once a grower was authorized to accept FMNP, the grower was required to get set up an account in the “WIC Direct Vendor Portal,” a mobile website used by four other states, Washington DC, and two native nations this year. This also required establishing a “processing agreement” that would enable transactions to be directly deposited into the grower’s bank account each week.

Not surprisingly, this process presented many challenges for growers including:

- Technology: iOS / Android
- Setting up an account and login credentials for the Vendor Portal
- Finalizing the account set up with payment processor, CDP (Custom Data Processing, Inc.)
- Problem-solving customer issues at the farmers market (reading QR codes, PINs, having benefits activated, knowing balances)
- Managing FMNP accounts for both a farmers market and farm store (farm stand)
- Language barriers



PROCESS FOR WIC PARTICIPANTS AND SENIORS



Both WIC and Senior participants were required to change from the paper \$4.00 checks to an electronic benefit that used a QR code.

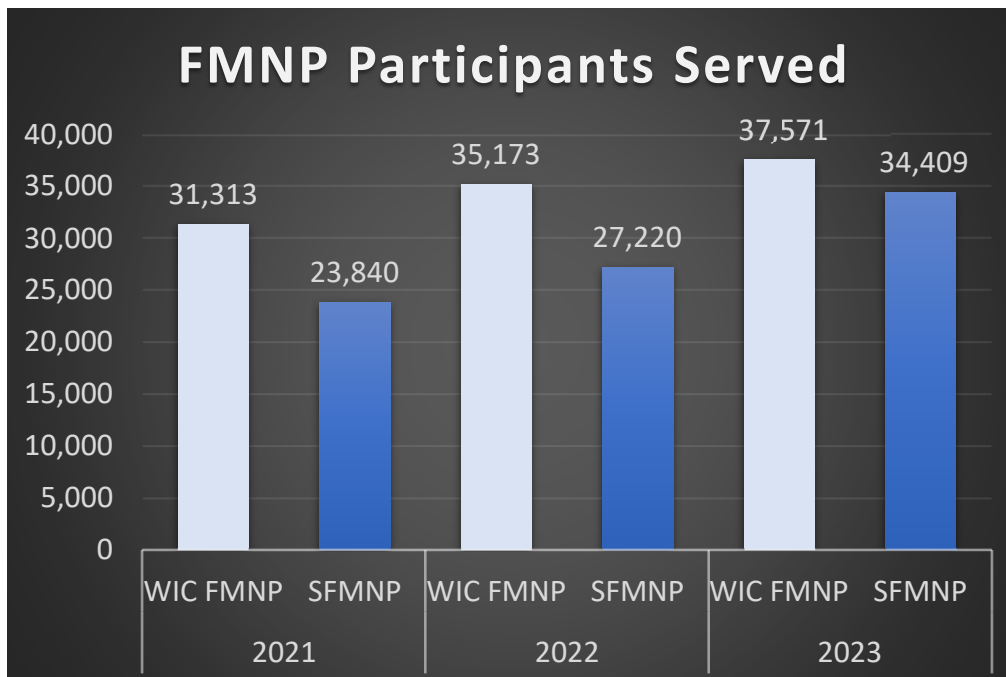
Seniors were assigned a new card with a QR code after applying to the Senior FMNP program. WIC participants were given a QR code that was specific to them and their benefits. WIC shoppers had more options because the QR code became available on the WICShopper app in mid-July.

Challenges included:

- Senior sign ups
- Distribution of QR codes for WIC participants
- Timing of when benefits were loaded for WIC and Seniors
- PIN numbers
- Seniors had a really hard time knowing what their balance was. In late August a new Senior FMNP app was introduced but did not have widespread outreach or support.

INITIAL RESULTS OF THE 2023 FMNP SEASON

States that have already implemented electronic benefits have reported that they lose vendors and redemptions decline in the first year. It is not until the second year that they start reporting of growers trusting and joining the program again and redemption increasing. Fortunately, here in WA we were able to maintain and provide the same amount of vendor to participants during the first year of implementation.



Source: WSDOH, Nov. 7, 2023

According to the Department of Health, the number of WIC participants benefiting from WIC FMNP and the Fruit and Vegetable Benefits increased from 35,173 to 37,571 or 6% between 2022 and 2023. These numbers include infants and children. The number of Seniors receiving

FMNP benefits also increased from 27,220 to 34,409 or 26% between 2022 and 2023. (Note: not all Seniors or WIC participants who received the FMNP benefits actually used them. Further analysis is needed to ascertain the exact number of people who used the FMNP benefits in 2023.)

98% of WIC agencies participated in FMNP in 2023. Of these, 88% of WIC sites issued 100% of their allocation and the remaining clinics distributed over 85% of their allocation. This is the highest level of allocations made for FMNP to date.

WIC FMNP allocated \$1,052,250 food dollars to the FMNP program in 2023. This is \$28 per eligible participant, up to three people or \$84 per household.

Senior FMNP participants received a total of \$80.00 which came from both state and federal funding.

The FMNP season is June 1 to Oct 31 and any benefits not redeemed in this period are lost.

The WIC “Fruit and Vegetables Benefits” allocated to all WIC participants in FFY 2023 were:

- \$26 for children's participants
- \$47 for pregnant and non-breastfeeding participants
- \$52 for breastfeeding participants
- \$78 for participants fully breastfeeding twins or triplets

The amount of these benefits has increased in FFY2024.

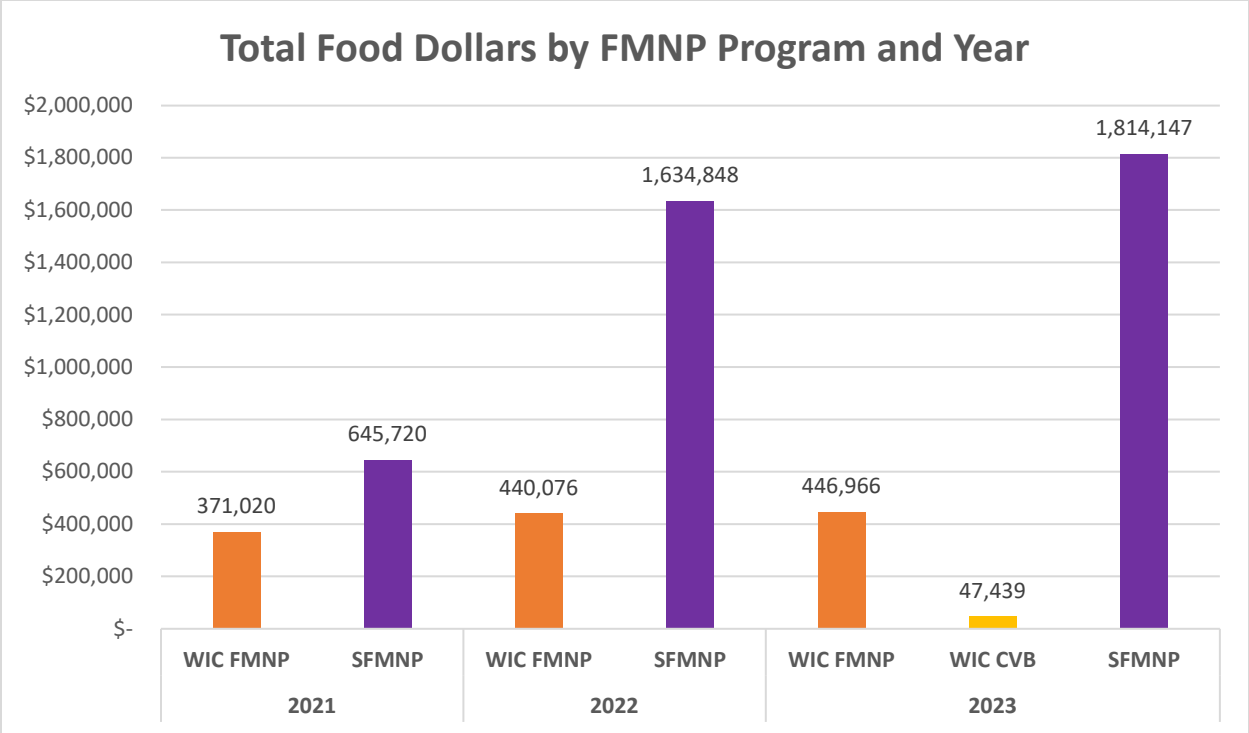
FMNP REDEMPTIONS IN 2023

Overall, the FMNP redemptions in 2023 were extremely positive given it was the first year of electronic benefits and all of the challenges faced by growers, shoppers, farmers markets, local WIC agencies and AAAs. In all, 56% of the FNS allocation to FMNP was redeemed in 2023, representing an increase of 1% from 2022.

Between 2022 and 2023:

- WIC FMNP redemptions increased 1.5% to \$446,966
- Senior FMNP redemption increased almost 11% to \$1,814,147
- The combined total of WIC and Senior FMNP increased almost 9% from \$2,074,924 to \$2,261,113. This includes FMNP redeemed at farm stands.
- New in 2023, \$47,439 in WIC Fruit and Vegetable Benefits were redeemed at farmers markets and farm stands.

FMNP remains the largest nutrition assistance program in Washington State both in terms of number of people reached and amount of benefits used. This program also directly supports Washington farmers by design, making it a win-win for our state.



Source: WSDOH, Nov. 7, 2023

The amount of benefits redeemed by growers varies widely. The top growers receive over \$25,000 in sales, up to over \$100,000 for the very top two.

2023 WIC FMNP + Senior FMNP + WIC Fruits and Vegetable Benefits			
Vendor	Total Redemption	Vendor	Total Redemption
A	\$141,958.78	J	\$38,461.16
B	\$106,026.15	K	\$37,764.02
C	\$79,685.97	L	\$37,368.68
D	\$75,233.05	M	\$37,292.00
E	\$58,313.85	N	\$35,764.97
F	\$52,010.08	O	\$31,992.70
G	\$44,602.69	P	\$28,778.92
H	\$41,388.61	Q	\$28,416.28
I	\$39,832.49	R	\$28,010.48

Source: WSDOH, Nov. 7, 2023

FMNP PLANS FOR 2024

Katherine shared some of the known FMNP plans for 2024.

<h3>System Enhancement</h3>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vendors will be able to track sales by location in the Vendor Portal.
<h3>WIC FMNP</h3>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• As e-WIC cards are replaced the person's unique QR code will be printed on their card.• WIC FMNP benefits will increase from \$28 to \$30 per season.• DOH will provide new signage for growers to use in the non-FMNP season (Nov 1 to May 31).
<h3>Senior FMNP</h3>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There will be outreach to AAAs and Seniors about the new mobile app for Senior FMNP that was released in August.• Will include "how to download the app" help.
<h3>Promotions</h3> <p>from Rescue Agency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grower Training Videos on how to use WIC Direct Vendor Portal in English and Spanish (online now)• Static graphics and short videos designed for digital media placements will be part of paid media campaign for WIC and Senior FMNP.





FARMERS MARKET FMNP AUTHORIZATION FOR 2024-2026

Farmers markets are authorized to participate in FMNP on a three-year cycle. In 2024, all farmers markets will need to be reauthorized. FMNP Applications are available from the DOH or WSFMA and have been emailed to farmers markets.

- If the Farmers Market operates year-round, please apply by December 31.
- For seasonal Farmers Markets, the deadline is April 1.

Farmers markets are required to attend a FMNP training at the beginning of a 3-year cycle or anytime that the manager changes. In 2024, the DOH is planning:

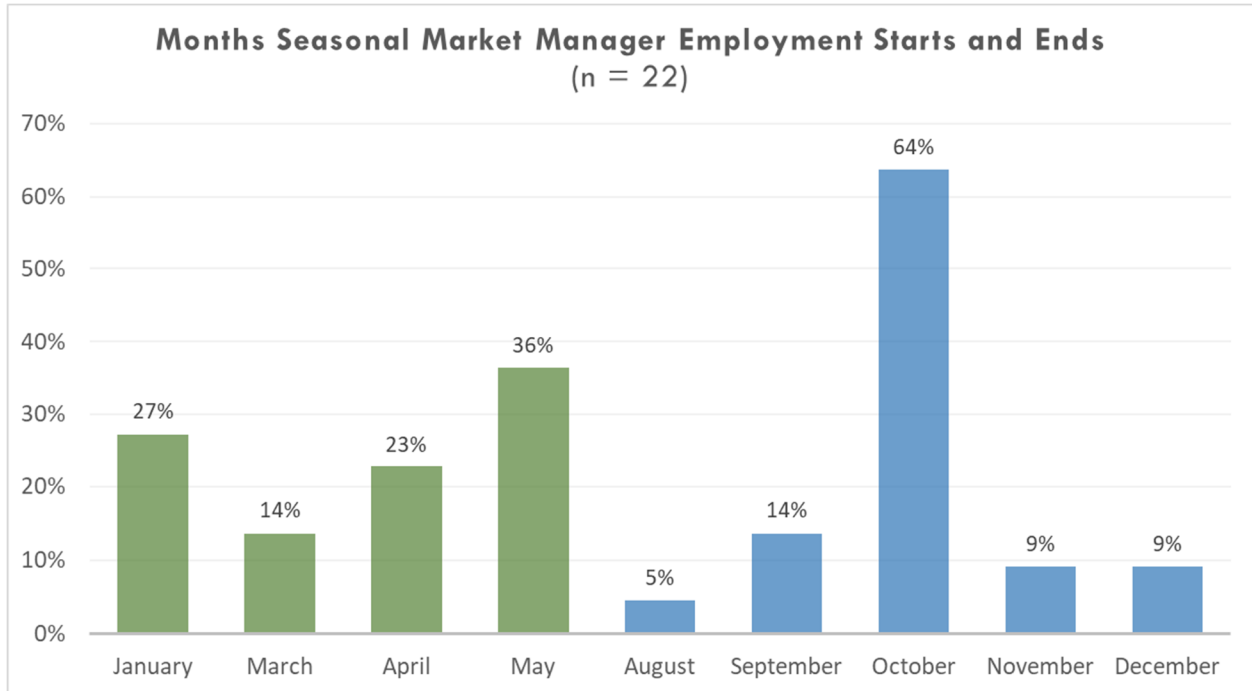
- Mandatory training for Farmers Markets will be held as part of the WSFMA Food Access Forum, on Thursday, March 21 from 12:00pm to 2:00pm.
- The DOH is also planning in-person trainings in Tukwila, Central WA, and Eastern WA.
- There will also be a new online training specifically for Farm Stores.

INITIAL RESULTS FROM THE WSFMA FARMERS MARKET FOOD ACCESS SURVEY

On Sept 15, the WSFMA launched a “Farmers Market Food Access Survey” to collect feedback from farmers markets about their season, experience with the FMNP transition to electronic benefits, and food access programs more generally. The survey was emailed to all farmers markets in WA that accepted either SNAP and/or FMNP. Respondents include 61 farmers market organizations and 74 farmers market locations in 26 counties; representing a response rate of 54%. The full report will be available by December 1, 2023 and available online.

Farmers Market Manager Seasonality

While 69% of respondents reported being employed by their farmers markets year-round, there are still many market managers that work seasonally. The average length of time was 8 months. This means that planning activities at farmers markets after the end of October is much more problematic as the manager may not be available until January or even April or May.

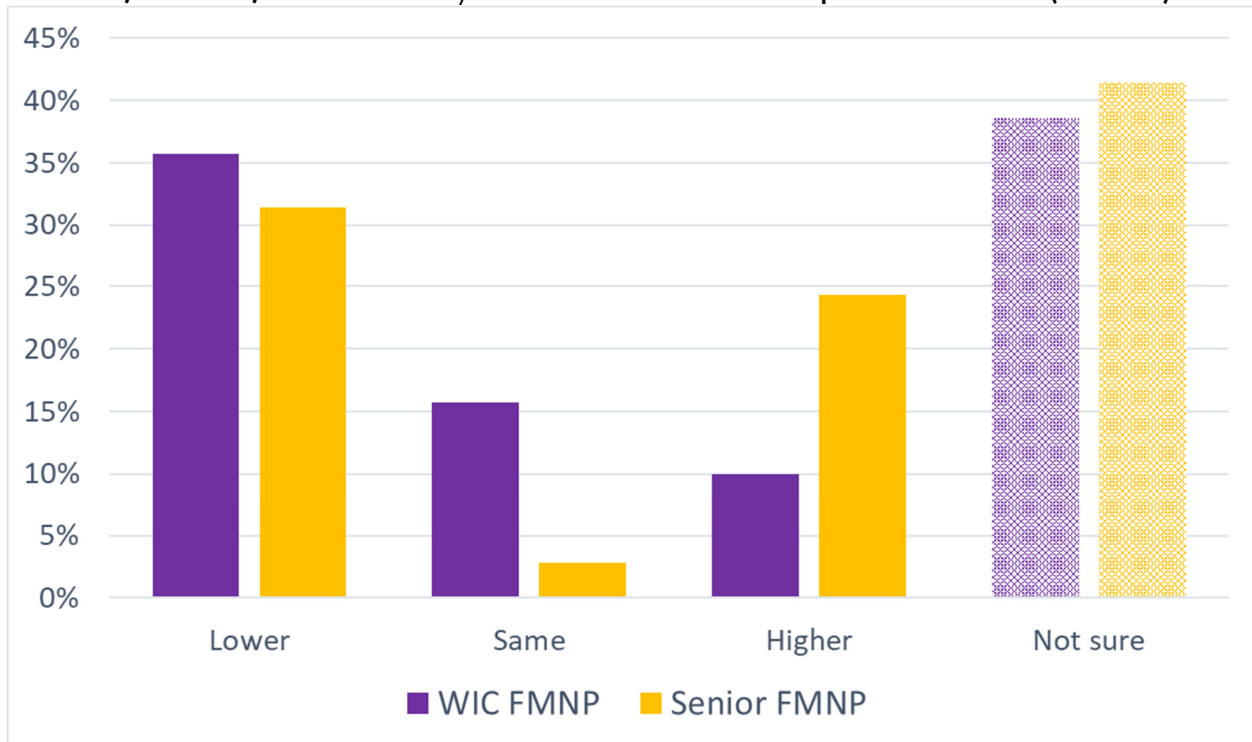


Perceived FMNP Sales in 2023 compared to 2022

When asked how FMNP sales in 2023 compared to 2022, most managers were not sure. This was in part due to the transition to electronic benefits. The 2023 launch of the Vendor Portal did not include a much needed feature to be able to track and report sales by market location. Therefore, collecting sales data from growers became problematic for many markets. The growers were able to track sales/transactions by date which helped to a certain extent.

Of the farmers markets that responded with their perception of sales, most (30-35%) thought that 2023 sales would be lower, for both WIC and Senior FMNP. For WIC sales, only 10% of farmers markets thought that sales would be higher in 2023, and 15% thought they would be about the same. For Senior sales, almost 25% thought they would be higher, and less than 5% thought they would be about the same.

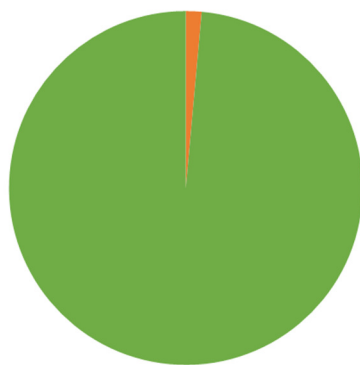
In 2023, to date, how do WIC/Senior FMNP sales compare to 2022? (n = 70)



Importance of Getting Benefits to Participants by June 1

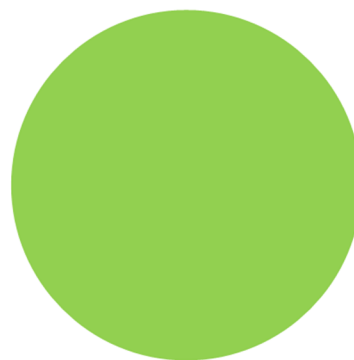
For a variety of reasons, many FMNP participants do not receive their benefits by or before June which is when the 5-month FMNP season starts. This was especially true in 2023 as many of the local agencies and partners were still learning how the QR codes would be distributed, activated, and used at farmers markets or farm stands.

Does your Farmers Market typically have fruits, vegetables, and other products that FMNP shoppers could buy available in June?



■ No ■ Yes

Do you think that WIC and Senior FMNP shoppers should have their benefits available to use at Farmers Markets on June 1?



■ Yes

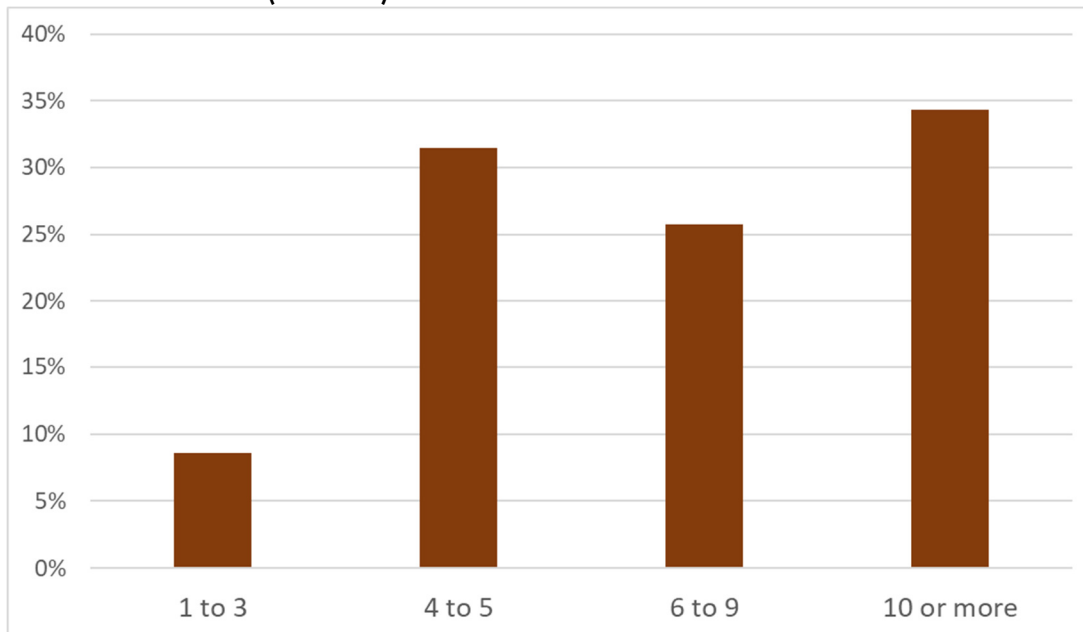
Survey results confirm that 99% of farmers markets have products that FMNP shoppers can buy in June and that 100% think that shoppers should have their FMNP benefits in hand by June 1. The WSFMA will continue to advocate for this goal so that everyone can buy Washington asparagus, berries, greens, and even cherries with FMNP benefits.

Number of FMNP Growers and Number Accessing Portal Improved by September

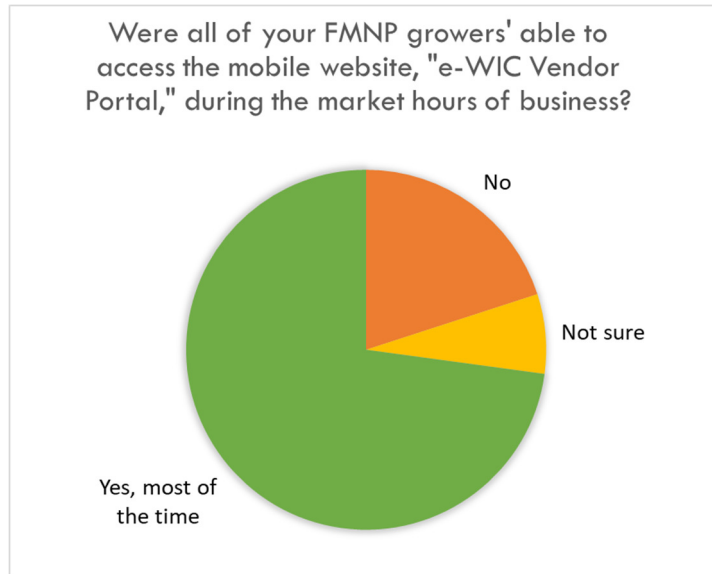
A significant challenge in June and July 2023 was that many growers were still working through the FMNP authorization and processing agreement needed to accept sales using the Vendor Portal. For others, they struggled to be able to read the QR codes, accept PIN, and help problem-solve issues that shoppers had. For some growers who were authorized and set up, they did not use the Vendor Portal for any sales in 2023. The perceived lack of FMNP growers early in the season was an added challenge for shoppers who could not find FMNP vendors.

According to survey results, most farmers markets had at least 4 to 5 authorized growers; less than 10% reported only having 1 to 3 growers. The FMNP Team was flexible about the 5 grower minimum rule this year due to the transition to a brand new system.

By mid-September, how many authorized FMNP growers sold at your Farmers Market in 2023? (n = 70)



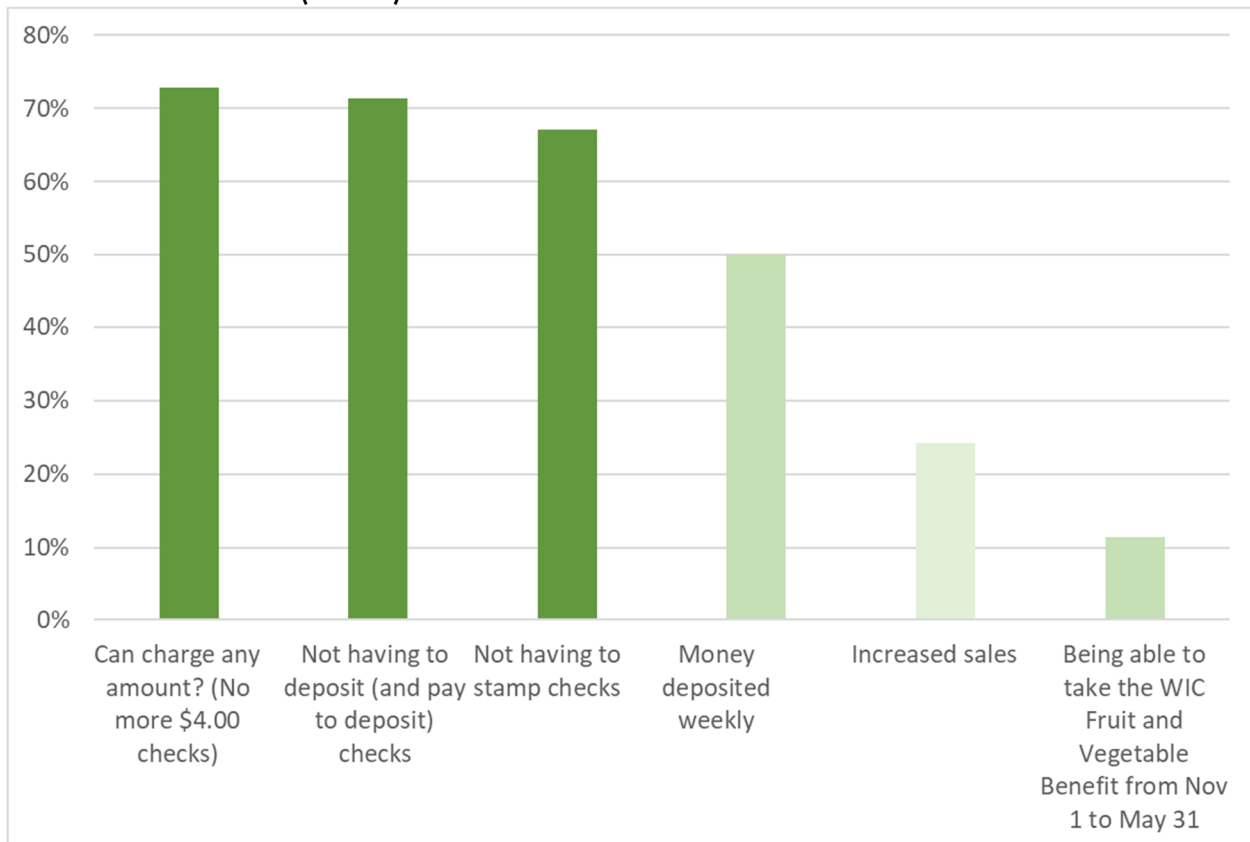
Farmers markets reported that, by September, most growers were able to use the Vendor Portal. However, there still remains important follow up and work so that all growers are able to use it to accept FMNP benefits.



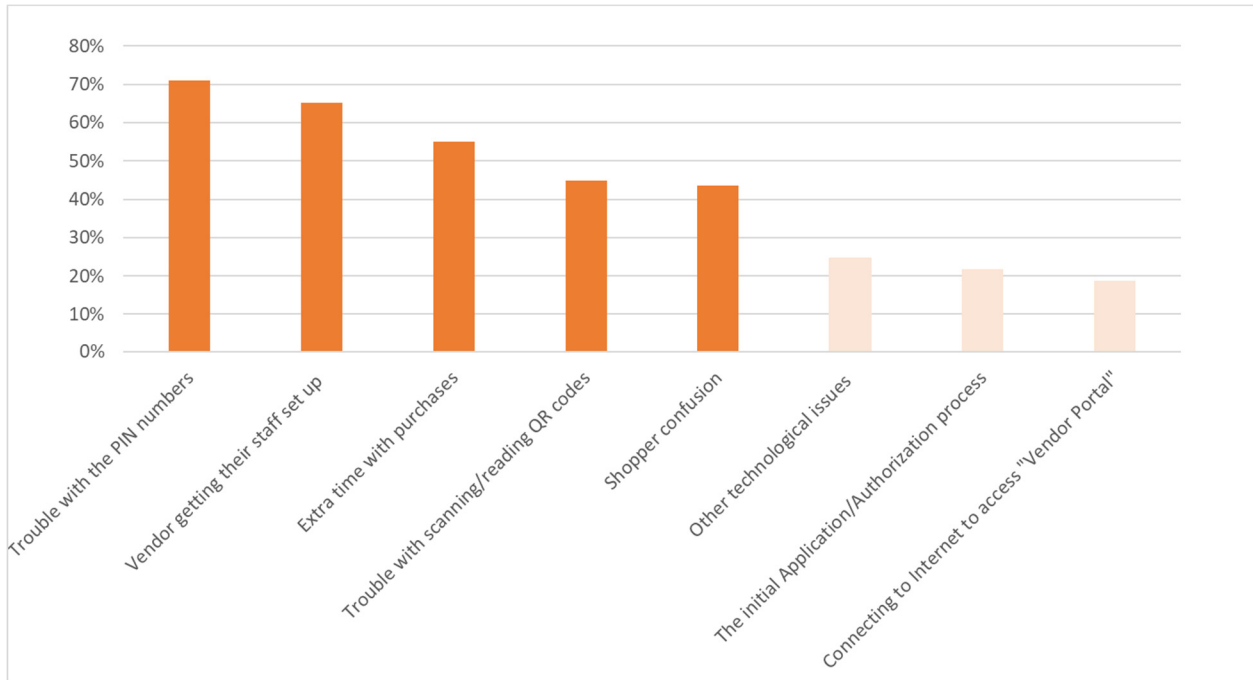
Mixed Review So Far

The farmers markets' perception of what they heard from growers had both positives and negatives.

What do you think most FMNP growers who got set up like BEST about the electronic benefits? (n=68)



What do you think most FMNP growers who got set up like LEAST about the electronic benefits? (n=69)



Among the features that farmers markets think that growers liked the best, not having to accept \$4.00 checks was at the top. With the \$4.00 paper checks, growers were not allowed to give change which made sales more challenging. This was followed closely by not having to deposit stacks and stacks of \$4.00 checks (often for a fee) and not having to stamp each check with the market and the grower ID numbers, a task that took time away from other important work during the busy market season. The farmers markets didn't think that weekly deposits, increased sales, or the WIC Fruit and Vegetable Benefits were features that growers liked as well.

Among the features that farmers markets think that growers liked the least, the top problem was with the PIN numbers. This included being given the wrong PIN in some cases, forgetting the PIN, having trouble entering it on a small device during a busy market day, and the small PIN pad in the Vendor Portal. Another top problem was training and getting seasonal staff or family members set up to use the Vendor Portal. The grower may technically be set up and ready to go, but the transfer of this information, getting the right smart devices, and connecting to the Internet was a problem for many.

The extra time it took to help customers was also perceived as something growers liked least. This is especially true for produce vendors on busy market days or when they were one of the few accepting FMNP. The transaction times are compounded by the multiple currencies accepted at farmer markets such that a grower may be using the same device for Square, taking tokens, SNAP Market Match scrip, and any market bucks.

The QR codes was a clear challenge for many. Initially there was confusion over if/when the benefits were activated for an individual so they might select produce and wait in line, only to get to check out and not be able to use their benefits. For some the smart devices did not pick up the QR codes and it was a struggle to read them. Fortunately, connecting to the Internet did not seem to emerge as a major problem as feared.

Thank you to SNAP-Ed

With the transition to e-FMNP, farmers markets experienced increased demands on their time and market operations. They were trained, and in turn educated shoppers, growers, and staff, while problem-solving issues in real time during their farmers market. With support from SNAP-Ed, 91 farmers markets were reimbursed \$84,563.90 for their work and extra materials, Internet connectivity, and signage. In all, farmers markets that submitted reimbursements reported 4,168 hours of extra time spent on food access programs so that shoppers could use their FMNP and SNAP benefits. Thank you Farmers Markets! And Thank you SNAP-Ed!

MORE INFORMATION

Customer Support:

FMNPTeam@doh.wa.gov

1-800-841-1410 extension 2, select 2.

Card Help: 1-844-359-3104

www.DOH.wa.gov/WIC