

The background of the entire page is a photograph of tall, thin reeds or grasses in a marsh, backlit by a warm, golden light from a low sun, creating a hazy, atmospheric effect. Overlaid on the center of the image is a white silhouette of the state of Mississippi. The title text is superimposed on this silhouette.

# REAL FOOD GULF COAST

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ASSESSING AND ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO LOCAL FOOD  
AWARENESS IN FOOD DESERTS IN GULFPORT, MISSISSIPPI

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The mission of Real Food Gulf Coast is to grow a sustainable food economy along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. This publication is based on work supported by the USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program, Agricultural Marketing Services. Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

DARLENE  
WOLNIK

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# INTRODUCTION

Mississippi leads the nation in levels of physical inactivity, as well as rates of obesity and in diabetes.<sup>1</sup> According to the 2013 State Indicator Report on Fruits and Vegetables by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, over 50% of interviewed Mississippians reported eating less than one serving of fruits and vegetables per day, which was the highest percentage for any state. In 2012, 296,508 Mississippi households (27% of households) participated in SNAP, a higher rate of participation than the national average (19%). SNAP participants in Mississippi received an average of \$123 per month in SNAP benefits in that year.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the 2012 Agricultural Census reported that Mississippi also lags behind other states in the amount of cropland acreage harvested for vegetables, melons, and potatoes in 2012, with only .7 percent compared to the U.S. average of 1.4 percent.<sup>3</sup> In terms of diversity, 74% of all cropland in the state devoted to vegetables is for sweet potatoes, making it one of Mississippi's largest agricultural exports.

In order to increase access to healthy food grown by regional producers, the state's number of farmers markets has risen significantly. In 2014, 82 markets were listed on Mississippi's Department of Agriculture and Commerce's (MDAC) website, with more than half of those "certified" by MDAC as offering Mississippi-grown items by their producers.<sup>4</sup> Yet, challenging economic variables for small-scale farmers in Mississippi remain; of the 38,076 small family farms in Mississippi in 2012, 67% reported annual sales of less than \$10,000, slightly lower than the 71% reported in the 2007 Census. The number of farms growing




vegetables to meet demand for fresher, more nutritious foods only rose slightly in those five years, from 1,156 in 2007 to 1,210 in 2012.<sup>5</sup>


In cooperation with their educational partner Real Food Gulf Coast, the year-round open-air markets in Long Beach and in Ocean Springs are actively increasing local food accessibility and affordability in South Mississippi. Inspired by their success, the City of Gulfport opened a market in 2013 to accelerate access to regionally grown, healthful foods for their citizens, including those living in the areas defined as “food deserts”.<sup>6</sup> The Gulfport, Long Beach and Ocean Springs markets are all managed with volunteer labor, supported by South Mississippi Farmers Market Association.

In order for the Gulfport market community to understand the perceptions of family shoppers that live within the food desert of Gulfport MS, interviews were conducted of individuals using social services agencies. Those results were compared to interviews with shoppers at the Long Beach and Ocean Springs farmers markets.

To identify and examine the factors that encouraged or discouraged Mississippi farmers to join farmers markets or use sustainable growing practices, Mississippi farmers currently using markets to sell their goods were interviewed. Farmers who sold goods to outlets other than farmers markets were also included in the interview population.

The goal of this report is to offer markets and their partners a more complete picture of the factors influencing both consumer and farmer participation in farmers markets. Equipped with this information, markets and supporting organizations can design more effective outreach campaigns encouraging their wider use, thereby maximizing their positive community impacts.





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# FARMER DATA

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Seventeen market farmers that sell regularly at Long Beach and Ocean Springs farmers markets were interviewed in the winter season of 2013/2014. The seventeen farmers are the entirety of the agricultural producers that sell their goods at those two markets. That data was compared to interviews collected from fourteen farmers that do not use farmers markets but operate farms in Harrison and surrounding counties. Dr. Christine E.H. Coker, Associate Research and Extension Professor of Urban Horticulture Mississippi State University, Extension Service conducted the non-market farmer interviews.

## Products & Production Practices

- > The market farmers (MktF) used less acreage to grow their items than the interviewed non-market farmers (NMktF), even though their farm sizes were similar: 70% of the MktF used less than five acres for production while 58% of the NMktF utilized less than five acres for production.
- > 81% of NMktF described their farming practices as “conventional,” while only 33% of the MktF did. The largest percentage of MktF (50%) used Integrated Pest Management (IPM) practices.
- > 25% of the MktF sold certified organic products, while none of the NMktF Reported selling certified organic products.
- > MktF had more varied types of production across the categories reported, and reported production in all categories.<sup>7</sup> NMktF did not report any production in the Dairy, Poultry (meat birds), Beef, or Pork categories.

## Using & Choosing Marketing Outlets

- > Over 66% of MktF have sold through farmers markets for more than five years. The majority of these (55%) learned about markets from other farmers, while more than one-quarter learned about the market through advertising. Nearly half use two to three markets to sell their goods, and that same number (47%) are using more markets than the previous year (2013). Only one vendor reported using fewer markets than the previous year.
- > Among the most important factors in choosing a market among MktF was “fair treatment to farmers” (71%) with “good management” the second most cited factor. More than half of those interviewed, however, also cited secondary reasons that they chose a market, including that it was in their community and that it was an “established” market.



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- > The number of outlets at which both groups currently sell their goods did not vary widely, but the types of new outlets that they would attempt to sell goods did.
- > A majority of NMktF (67%) would use Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) or farm stands, while only 47% of the MktF said they would use those same outlets. More NMktF said no to selling their goods to peddlers (resellers) and would rather add retail outlets (e.g. supermarkets, natural food stores, etc.) while MktF said that selling to retail stores was the least desirable sales choice.
- > Both groups (MktF and NMktF) wanted shoppers to know more about seasonality of produce and the work required to grow food on small family farms. More MktF agreed that “allowing buyers to know that they could grow different products if needed” and “had low or no pesticide produce available” was important to them.





# SHOPPER DATA

Ninety shoppers that frequent the Long Beach and Ocean Springs farmers markets were interviewed. The Long Beach Farmers Market has an estimated average of 300-350 shoppers per market, while Ocean Springs is slightly larger, with an estimated 350-450 shoppers per market.

## Farmers Market Shoppers

- > Nearly 90% of farmers market shoppers (MktSh) interviewed traveled 20 minutes or less to shop for groceries.
- > The overwhelming majority of respondents (99%) used a car for grocery shopping; in general, and slightly fewer (93%) reported using a car specifically for farmers market shopping.
- > Convenient location/hours was the most important factor when deciding where to buy fruits and vegetables, with freshness and price as the next most important factors. The variety of fruits and vegetables and the convenient location and hours of grocery stores were chosen as better than farmers markets.
- > The freshness and cleanliness of fruits and vegetables at farmers markets were rated higher than that at grocery stores. Prices were perceived as "better" at farmers

market by 42% of market shoppers, though 27% believed that the grocery store had better prices.

- > Nearly three-quarters of market shoppers (74%) shopped at farmers markets other than the one at which they were interviewed in the last year. Nearly half (49%) of market shoppers bought half or more of their fruits and vegetables from the farmers market.
- > The quality of fruits and vegetables available at the grocery store was rated as "good to excellent" by 76% (of shoppers, while fewer (61%) rated the price of fruits & vegetables at the grocery store as "good to excellent."
- > Most market shoppers (85%) learned about the market through word of mouth or by going past the market.
- > The majority of the market shoppers interviewed was female (70%) and had 2-3 people in their household (69%). Less than 40% of respondents reported having children under 18 years old in their household.
- > The majority of the market shoppers (96%) used cash at markets "always" or "most of the time," and only a small percentage participated in government benefit programs.<sup>8</sup>

## Resident, Non-Farmers Market Shoppers (NMktSh)

Between 2013 and 2014, 107 interviews were conducted by staff at CLIMB Community Development Corporation (CDC), a Mississippi non-profit and community development agency that provides workforce training, housing and financial counseling, housing development, small business services, and disaster recovery services in the Gulf South Region. Interviews were held with those who identified themselves as residents who shopped for their family table but did not use farmers markets (NMktSh).

- > More than three-quarters of NMktSh traveled 20 minutes or less to do their grocery shopping. The number of respondents that used a car to do that shopping (91%) was only slightly lower than those in the farmers market-shopping group (99%) who used a car to travel to the grocery store.
- > 57% of NMktSh felt the quality of the produce at the grocery store was "good to excellent," compared to 76% of the MktSh group that answered "good to excellent" about grocery store produce.<sup>9</sup>

- > Fifty-five percent of NMktSh rated the price of produce at grocery stores as "good to excellent," while a slightly higher percentage (61%) of the MktSh thought the grocery stores' prices were "good to excellent."
- > Freshness, variety, and convenience were selected as non-market shoppers' most important factors when choosing where to purchase fruits and vegetables.
- > The types of transactions conducted at the grocery store among NMktSh was varied: 43% "always" uses cash, and only 19% "always" use their SNAP card.
- > 60% of the respondents were not aware of the existence of the nearest farmers markets.
- > When asked why they did not shop at any farmers markets, inconvenient hours and location, followed by unfamiliarity of what markets carry, were the chief reasons selected.





# INCREASING ACCESS THROUGH NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

## History of Nutrition Assistance for Low-Income Shoppers at Farmers Markets

The transition to Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) was completed by 2004. This improvement in efficiency was an immediate disadvantage for the open-air farmers markets that had begun to flourish across the U.S. by the mid 1990s. Without electricity or phone lines available, markets that had accepted paper food stamps found themselves losing those shoppers whose currency was no longer accepted. Shortly thereafter, a small group of market operators began to pioneer wireless Point of Sale (POS) and wooden token systems, which also allowed them to accept debit and/or credit cards, which reduced the stigma of a token system only used by SNAP. As markets explored the potential of these systems, public health and social services partners supported the efforts of SNAP acceptance at markets by offering funding for outreach and evaluation. Outreach often included added-value financial incentive programs to increase redemption of SNAP dollars at markets for fruits and vegetables, as well as increasing other food benefit programs available to market-goers.

As card technology continues to become more cost effective and, in some cases, subsidized by state agencies eager to get card access to more markets, a growing number of organizations are attempting to embed these new systems. Significant costs remain, however, for both markets and farmers wanting to offer the technology--staffing, bookkeeping, service and transaction fees, as well as replacement machines (once the initial free program expires) continue to cripple markets operating chiefly on volunteer efforts. For individual farmers adopting EBT technology, the opportunity cost of leaving the fields to reconcile and negotiate these systems may necessitate higher prices for their customers.

## Recent Advances & Ongoing Challenges

In 2013, USDA Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) contracted with the National Association of Farmers Market Nutrition Programs (NAFMNP) to operate a \$4,000,000 program to purchase wireless terminals and support services for one year for direct-marketing farmers and farmers markets that are not yet SNAP authorized.


Many market organizations like the Long Beach Farmers Markets have already attempted an earlier version of card processing prior to the Market Link 2013 opportunity. Having already applied and become authorized as an FNS SNAP retailer, these markets cannot avail themselves of the free equipment or technical assistance offered through the MarkeLink™ program.

The Long Beach Farmers Market received a wireless POS card terminal in 2012 through Mississippi's then-new state program that provided free machines to markets and direct-marketing farmers interested in accepting SNAP EBT. After reporting \$1,275 in SNAP sales in 2013, the market's organizers decided to return their machine and discontinue their centralized system in February 2014. They reasoned that

the presence of the centralized machine, which required extensive outreach as well as bookkeeping and farmer redemption systems, reduced the ability and interest among farmers to acquire their own POS machines for use at markets. More importantly, the Gulf Coast markets have not received ongoing support in order to recover the fixed and per-transaction costs for the machine or the staffing required to effectively operate the systems. The market organizers hope some of their few vendors who may apply to become SNAP authorized will receive the free technology, freeing their time to conduct the necessary outreach to SNAP program participants.

## Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) Coupons

Low-income seniors and WIC participants continue to have access to fresh farm goods at farmers markets, where they can redeem Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) coupons with farmers. These programs were introduced in the 1990s when Massachusetts Senators Atkins and Kerry introduced legislation to create a federally mandated WIC FMNP program, which was followed in 2000 with a similar program referred to as the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP). The coupons are spent on fresh fruits and vegetables with individual farmers, who must be enrolled with the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC), and are reimbursed after mailing them in, depositing them in a bank, or collected by the market manager who in turn mails them to the issuing agency. Both WIC, FMNP, and SFMNP are run through the MDAC, while the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) oversees SNAP access and retailer management.



*outreach often included*

**ADDED-VALUE  
FINANCIAL  
INCENTIVE**

*programs to increase  
redemption of SNAP  
dollars at markets*



## WIC Program

The Mississippi WIC program offers program recipients an annual benefit of \$15 (three checks valued at \$5 each). Farmers markets are selected for the program based on specific criteria agreed upon between MDAC and the MDHS WIC Program. These criteria include proximity to WIC nutrition sites, WIC target nutrition areas, and areas of farm produce availability. As these sites are chosen, MDAC trains and certifies farmers' market managers and participating farmers.

The FMNP season begins in June or July of each year with the distribution of checks to eligible recipients. The checks are valid for use at all authorized farmers' markets until October of that same year. Since no change can be given to program recipients, if the value of purchased products is less than the printed denomination value, farmers are encouraged to make up the difference with additional produce items. Currently, the program operates in Bolivar, Clay, Hinds, Holmes, Lauderdale, Lowndes, Noxubee, Pike, and Tate counties, and not available to the Gulf Coast markets. In fiscal year 2013, 12 markets and 200 farmers redeemed more than \$90,000 in WIC FMNP vouchers.<sup>10</sup>

## Senior FMNP

Vouchers for the Senior FMNP are issued by designated agencies working with seniors at local feeding sites, through case manager visits, or to Medicaid waiver recipients. Vouchers are redeemed by participants for the purchase of fresh fruits, vegetables, and honey from farmers at participating farmers markets. Eligible recipients that meet certain income guidelines are certified by the designated staff to receive a one-time benefit of \$25 (five checks valued at

\$5 each). In 2013, the Senior FMNP connected nearly 4,000 seniors with 300 farmers at 26 farmers markets<sup>11</sup> in Adams, Carroll, Desoto, Forrest, Holmes, Harrison County and other areas throughout Central Mississippi, East Central Mississippi, North Mississippi, Southwest Mississippi, South Mississippi, the Gulf Coast, the Golden Triangle and other counties in the Mississippi Delta region.

The Biloxi, Gulfport, Long Beach, Ocean Springs, and Pass Christian Farmers Markets all accept Senior FMNP, but their markets have not yet been accepted into the state's WIC FMNP. Long Beach, Ocean Springs and Gulfport Farmers Markets reported modest improvements in the Senior FMNP redemption rates (calculated as the value of coupons submitted for reimbursement by farmers/the value of coupons issued to seniors by designated agencies), averaging 41.4% in 2012 and approximately 59% in 2013. Comparably, the other South Mississippi issuance region (Hattiesburg area) reports redemption of Senior FMNP coupons in its three markets between 81% and 84.5%.<sup>12</sup>

Presently, Mississippi is among the states that do not yet authorize farmers to accept WIC Cash Value Vouchers for fruits and vegetables.<sup>13</sup>





# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Farmer Outreach

### > Support CSAs and roadside stands.

Many of the Non-Farmers Market Farmers (NMktF) interviewed were not interested in selling through farmers markets, but did indicate an interest in setting up roadside stands or CSAs.

With electronic card technology now available, those outlets could support nutrition program shoppers as well as extend options for existing cash farmers market customer base by offering mid-week local fruits and vegetables.

> **Keep up with trending shopper demands.** Farmers indicated the desire to share their unique messages with more buyers, whether family table shoppers, intermediate retailers, or wholesale buyers. Market advocates could assist local farmers with refining such messaging as well as collect feedback from market shoppers to further educate farmers on their product selection. Comparing two segments of farmers revealed that Market Farmers (MktF) are more prepared to respond to shopper demands for new products and that some of them are moving towards low/no pesticide production practices which seems to indicate that markets are a place for

opinions and trends to be tracked and shared between shoppers and farmers.

> **Ask market enthusiasts to promote markets and farmers.** Market events and promotional campaigns can play a significant role in educating shoppers on the benefits of purchasing locally grown/produced food directly from farmers. This not only helps spread the intended message of local economic developers and public health advocates, but also relieves already-burdened farmers of the time-consuming tasks of marketing and promotions. Given the ability of farmers markets to attract a diverse group of enthusiastic and variously skilled patrons, a volunteer-based Market and Farmer Support Services group could be created to assist farmers in marketing and communication. Such services might include website creation, social media tutorials, advice on display improvement, and even articles written for local media, all of which could serve to promote their beloved market and aid farmers in telling their stories to a broader audience. Market management or its governing board would play a supervisory role to ensure that messages are easy to understand, consistent, and appealing.

> **Trumpet the availability of meat, dairy, and seafood products.** Since market farmers (MktF) offered a more diverse selection of products than non-market farmers, markets should create campaigns raising awareness about the availability of locally produced meat, dairy, and unique value-added foods at farmers markets, and the benefits of buying such foods direct from farmers.

> **Conduct small “trade shows” for local foragers.** Farmers are interested in a wide selection of outlets at which to sell their goods, but have very little information about all of the potential outlets. Farmer advocates (Extension agents, non-profit sustainable agriculture organizations, etc.) should collect information on these potential outlets and host workshops for farmers to learn more about identifying and approaching appropriate outlets for their products. One successful bridge to connect producers with buyers is to hold small “trade shows” with procurement representatives of small/ independent retailers, restaurants, co-ops, and institutions. These events could assist in building important relationships along the value chain.

### > Collect market vendor testimonials.

Since information from other farmers was the top reason market farmers cited for choosing markets, vendor “testimonials” could be collected and share with Extension agents and other farmer advocates, and even be included on vendor applications. Farmers market vendors could be primed to relay the benefits of selling directly to consumers at markets to their counterparts who are exploring alternative sales outlets.

### > Encourage heirloom products.

Farmers market vendors are uniquely suited to test small quantities of new varieties of fruits and vegetables, and get efficient customer feedback. Market organizations can facilitate this kind of product diversification and innovation by using social media and newsletters to alert regular shoppers about the introduction of new items, as well as by sharing ideas for how to use them in recipes. Small seed companies like High Mowing Seeds in Vermont have indicated a desire to have farmers test new varieties on their behalf; a test crop campaign may allow market farmers to easily add niche products.



New Shopper Outreach

- > **Know your vendors, know their products.** One main goal of any farmers market is to continue to attract new shoppers to patronize its vendors, as some of “regulars” may migrate to new food shopping outlets or add vegetable gardening skills that result in less frequent trips to the market. Each small business at markets has their own product list and target customer, so markets will do well to understand how every individual vendor may appeal to any particular demographic they hope to attract. This aligns with the desires expressed among farmers for their buyers to better understand their particular niche and business. While any farmer would prefer shoppers be more knowledgeable about the myriad of benefits of eating healthy and local, this is an iterative process. A possible solution is to prepare ‘talking points’ for farm stand staff and farmers to quickly convey key messages. Signage at individual stalls might also be improved, and a staffed market information table should convey simple, bullet-point messages to shoppers.
- > **Freshness rates highest (higher than local).** Shopper respondents in this research rated freshness and price as the most significant characteristics of how farmers markets are “better” than grocery stores. Therefore, offering a side-by-side comparison of popular items at markets and stores based on these variables may attract new shoppers, and can be disseminated through social media and flyers in the community.  
  
Reports show that campaigns like “Mississippi Grown” may work well on a statewide level but have not been proven to change shopping patterns for

an individual area. A 2004 focus group study among Wisconsin consumers revealed that the definition of “local” was subjective. Participants offered a wide range of interpretations, including political boundaries or transportation methods used to get the food to market (truck vs. airplane). The most commonly agreed upon parameter for calling food “local” was a six to seven hour driving distance between production and consumption.<sup>14</sup> Despite the rapid growth in demand for local experienced in the decade since these results were published, it would be safe to say that “pride of place” is a persistent major motivating factor to consumers of local foods regardless of strict geographic limitations. African-American shoppers participating in the Wisconsin focus groups tended to define local in terms of relationships with farmers, which may indicate loyalty cards to be a potential avenue to enticing a more diverse shopping base to markets.<sup>15</sup> While price perceptions cannot be ignored, freshness remains a key competitive advantage for farmers markets.

> **Invest in permanent signs.** Eye-catching, permanent signage is a necessity, given that a large percentage of market shoppers interviewed found out about the markets by passing by. The signs should be branded with a market logo that conveys freshness and variety, which could be brainstormed, designed, or otherwise “crowdsourced” by the volunteer market support group.<sup>16</sup> If flyers feature people, they should include a wide range of shoppers (age and ethnicity/ color) – to signify visually that markets are for everybody.

Negotiating with municipal government and local business owners to allow (and possibly fund) use of a blank wall for a community mural is another potential way to create unique permanent signage.

- > Try “Bring a buddy” or Organized Trips. Agencies might create a bridge between benefit recipients and markets by organizing market outings. This reduces the risk and provides ‘safety in numbers’ for shy first-timers.

Outreach to Returning Shoppers

- > **Direct contact with farmers.** Markets have a wealth of narratives that appeal to different audiences at different times. For many early adopters, the direct contact with farmers and access to seasonal goods unavailable in other outlets is what initially attracts them to farmers markets. Yet, as a sign of market success, other outlets began offering access to those same local goods. As a result, even these early adopters must be reminded of the appeal of the farmers market as the direct link with those who grow their food. It is also helpful to remind them of market farmers’ new items with individual posts on social media outlets.
- > **Multiple markets for one shopper.** The large number of farmers market shoppers that reported shopping at other markets throughout the year indicates that cross marketing with nearby markets may be an effective and cost-efficient outreach strategy. Market vendors who sell at multiple markets may be offered a handout with “Here’s where you can find me,” or, if social media savvy, encouraged to “check in” on all of the market pages of those they attend regularly.



- > **Clean and affordable food.** It is noteworthy that farmers markets are rated as superior to supermarkets on the important factor of cleanliness, particularly when it applies to no/low packaged produce. This strength is worth promoting alongside price comparisons – 63% of shoppers indicated that farmers market prices are better or comparable to supermarkets and only one in four said market prices are higher.  
  
While it was not measured in this study, another factor found to resonate with some food shoppers is that buying locally keeps money in the local economy and creates jobs for community residents.



# Outreach to Low-Income Shoppers

## EBT Access

> **Farmer terminals.** The new era of farmer POS terminals points to the need for expanded marketing for using SNAP benefits at markets. Farmers adopting new card technology will need in-depth training to understand what products are SNAP eligible, assistance with outreach to low-income communities, and strategies for recovering the costs associated with technology and processing fees. Farmers must be familiar and comfortable with their chosen payment technology so that transactions are smooth and frustration-free for shoppers. Just as importantly, farmers must continue to view all shoppers positively and avoid discouraging card users in favor of cash users. Farmers using machines at roadside stands or with CSAs should receive technical assistance and additional point of purchase materials, including yard signs, permanent banners, and listings on statewide outreach literature. Current market shoppers can potentially be drawn to these added outlets on non-market days; those farmers may want to work side-by-side with market organizers to create a multi-layered marketing strategy for buying local in their area.

> **Multiple technology options.** Because of the time and financial costs associated with EBT management and outreach, there will be no “one size fits all” approach. A variety of options should be available to markets both small and large, beyond the a) fully centralized system or b) individual vendor system, as both present limitations to customer service, costs, and fraud

oversight. Recommendations for Vermont markets in the 2013 Vermont Market Currency Report included a technology and customer service audit of markets in order to identify the best card technology system for that market type.<sup>17</sup> For small markets, a SNAP-only “wired” machine along with paper coupons may serve best and keep costs low; other markets may invest in a permanent ATM that draws fees for all seven days of activity to cover the costs of SNAP transactions on market day.<sup>18</sup> In Massachusetts, an electronic token is being tested to reduce the costs and risk associated with the wooden token system currently being used by many centralized market systems.

As recommended by Broad, et al. in a 2010 report on food assistance programs and Mississippi farmers markets:

*Consider partnerships between farmers markets and local stores or other organizations with physical space. If a market is near a store that does not sell produce, the market may be able to share a wired EBT machine with the store. Recipients could obtain scrip tokens at the store to bring to the market. This could potentially increase both business for the store and access to the market. We would encourage any market or local business/organization to first clear up any liability concerns before proceeding.*

*Consider linkages between markets and churches by placing a wired EBT machine in the church community center. Markets could implement a scrip system, possibly staffed by a church volunteer.<sup>19</sup>*

## Incentives

For many markets, the path to reclaiming or encouraging more nutrition assistance program shoppers has been in the form of offering one time or seasonal cash incentives when using their card. Since the mid 2000s, markets have sought a multitude of partners to fund and facilitate these incentive programs in order to alter the benefit card user's fresh food purchasing habits. The cash incentive programs across the country has proven to be useful in attracting and, in many cases in retaining shoppers turned away previously by the lack of card-processing technology.<sup>20</sup>

> **Campaign-style incentives.** The best application of incentives needs further study across the United States. but “campaign-style” incentives working with a specific community center or residents in a single zip code as the targeted group, along with a beginning and end date for incentive eligibility has shown success at the Crescent City Farmers Market (CCFM) in New Orleans, among other markets. These time-limited campaigns require less funding than ongoing incentives, and encourages return shoppers in a shorter time period; more visits to the market build trust and knowledge and may be an indicator for true behavior change.

## FMNP Access

> **Offer access to weekday markets with community centers.** Lower redemption rates for FMNP in the targeted counties may stem from eligible users’ limited access for to shuttles or other transportation to get to weekend markets, and higher walkability from neighborhoods with seniors at the market in Hattiesburg, where redemption rates are higher. That lack of convenient access to weekend markets in Long Beach or Ocean Springs could be offset if the Gulfport market works closely with agencies to shuttle seniors to increase shopping activity. A group trip to the market can be made into a memorable event, and help participants overcome any initial reservations about whether markets are “for them.”

> **Add FMNP incentive first.** All of the Gulf Coast markets may also want to follow the example CCFM, the flagship market of nearby New Orleans. CCFM pioneered a cash incentive for seniors using FMNP coupons in which market staff host a “bingo” game at participating senior centers to help explain the program and the market, then schedule a day for that center at one of their weekday markets. Once a senior uses their entire booklet of coupons, CCFM offers a one-time incentive of market tokens to continue their visits after the FMNP season is over.<sup>21</sup> This incentive predated much of the nation's SNAP incentive work, and allowed CCFM to better understand



benefit shoppers by studying a targeted population before moving to a general incentive for SNAP users.

The success of incentive programs is reinforced by studies such as the 2014 study published in the Journal Food Policy that involved nearly 300 low-income women with young children from three regions across the U.S. who received governmental food assistance. More than half of the 138 women completing the study reported that they increased their vegetable consumption during the research period. "Our food choices are very complex, and issues with food security won't be solved with a single program," Carolyn Dimitri, an associate professor of food studies at NYU Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development noted. "Even though not all participants increased their consumption of produce, our study suggests that nutrition incentives are a promising option that can help economically disadvantaged families eat healthier diets."<sup>22</sup>

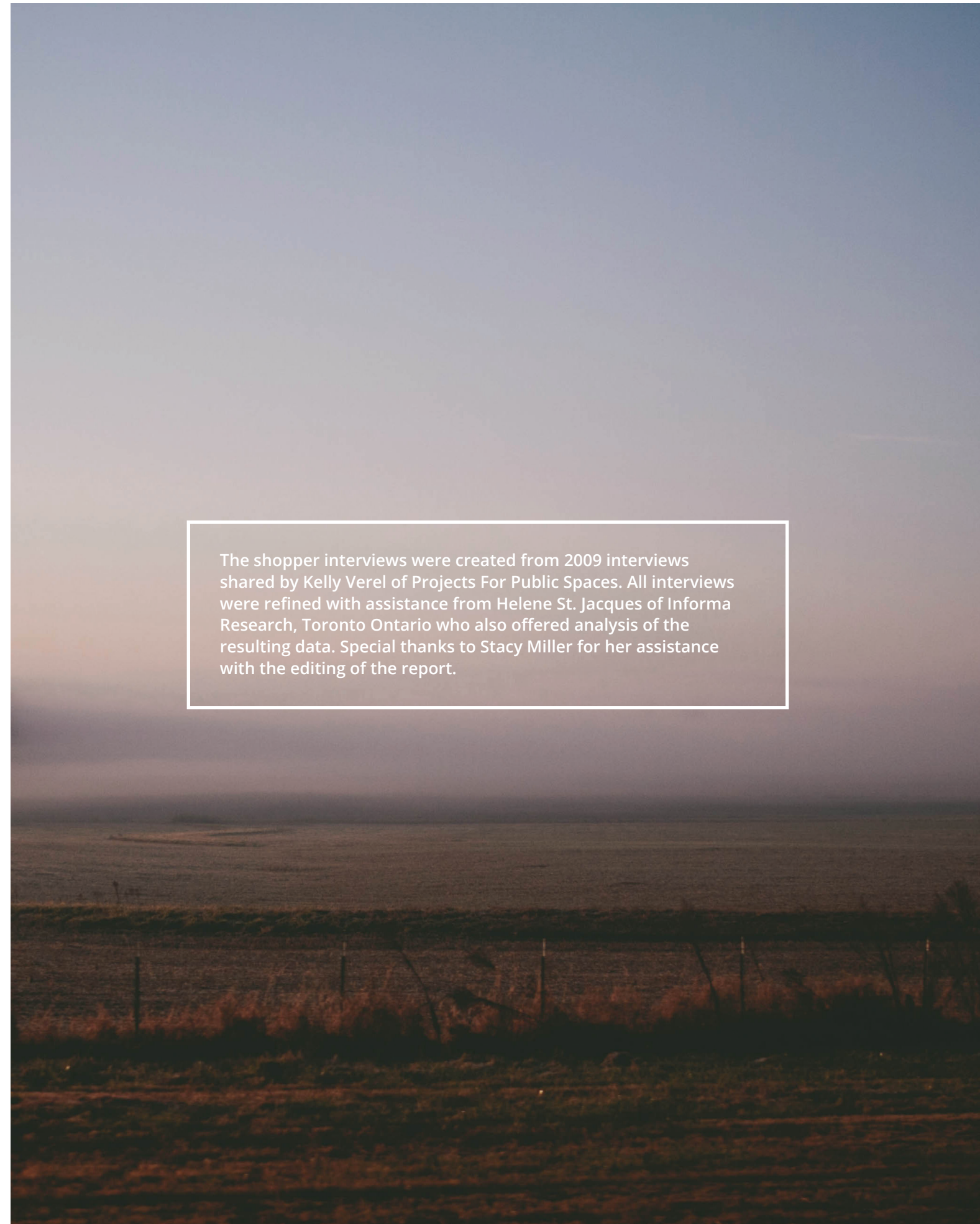
**> Food policy work.** The 2013 State Indicator Report on Fruits and Vegetables by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported no active local food policy councils in Mississippi,<sup>23</sup> though there is a statewide food council and reported conversations about starting local councils have begun with groups such as Delta Fresh Foods and Mississippi Sustainable Agriculture Network, among others. Encouraging practioners and

policymakers to sit together to work on long term answers is critical to the success of any local or regional initiative.

**> Realistic measurement.** It is vital that partner organizations and municipalities support grassroots initiatives and local innovations with long-term funding and policy support. The national advocacy organization, the Farmers Market Coalition, has begun a project called Farmers Market Metrics<sup>24</sup> in order for market organizations to be able to share unique and aggregated data with internal and external stakeholders; it is recommended that Gulf Coast markets participate in this project whenever possible.

\* In using the interview process to gather information, every attempt was made to collect a representational demographic for all groups. The number of responses represented 20%-25% of the (estimated) market shoppers and groups of farmers actively using farmers market and direct marketing channels. The resident surveys collected were a similar number to the market shoppers interview quantity.

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# END NOTES

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- 6 Food deserts, as defined by USDA, are "Urban neighborhoods and rural towns without ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food." See <https://apps.ams.usda.gov/fooddeserts/foodDeserts.aspx> for more information.
- 7 Categories included Horticulture (vegetables, fruits, herbs); Eggs; Crops (grains, legumes, oilseeds); Beekeeping; Processed and Value-Added Foods; Dairy; Poultry (meat birds); Beef; and Pork
- 8 While both markets had vendors that accepted Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) vouchers, only the Long Beach location had a centralized EBT terminal. Each market had, at most, only one or two vendors with their own EBT terminal; prepared food vendors are more likely to have credit card machines.
- 9 This high level of satisfaction among market shoppers may have resulted from shopping at higher quality grocery stores.
- 10 USDA Food and Nutrition Service. (2014). WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program 2013 Profile. Retrieved from <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/wic/WICFMNPProfile.pdf>.

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- 14 Zepeda, L., & Leviten-Reid, C. (2004). Consumers' views on local food. *Journal of Food Distribution Research*, 35(3), 1-6.
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- 16 Crowdsourcing is the process of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people rather than from traditional employees or suppliers. Learn more at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crowdsourcing>.
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- 21 Market Umbrella. (n.d.) Market incentives. Retrieved from <http://www.marketumbrella.org/index.php?page=market-projects>.
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