

For Immediate Release

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Eight farmers markets on Hawai'i Island now accept EBT

KAMUELA, Hawai'i—October 26, 2012—Eight Hawai'i Island farmers markets now accept EBT cards. SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly called food stamps) recipients can use their EBT cards at the Maku'u Farmers Market in Puna, Hilo Coffee Mill Farmers Market in Mountain View, Kino'ole Farmers Market in Hilo, Volcano Farmers Market in Volcano, Keauhou Farmers Market in Kona, Hawi Farmers Market in North Kohala, Hilo Farmers Market in Hilo and S.P.A.C.E. Farmers Market in Puna.

The Hilo Farmers Market, in operation since 1988, is recognized nationally as a pioneer in the development of the EBT system for farmers markets. The Hilo Farmers Market began accepting food stamps in 1995, but when the system changed from paper food stamps booklets to EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) it was not affordable or feasible to equip each vendor with a POS (Point of Sale) terminal. In 1998, the Hilo Farmers Market piloted a scrip system that accepted EBT at central location and then issued "Food Bucks" that were exchanged with the vendors for food. The Hilo Farmers Market was the first farmers market in the United States to accept food stamps using the EBT system, and still uses this system today.

"The EBT/SNAP program allows people of all walks of life to eat more fruits and vegetables grown locally," said Keith De La Cruz, market manager of the Hilo Farmers Market. "It in turn helps farmers and food vendors increase their sales and their bottom line. As a result, our local community benefits economically and customers live a more healthier lifestyle."

The Hilo Farmers Market paved the way for other markets to follow suit, but the cost of purchasing the POS terminals, printing food bucks, and administering the set-up of the program has been prohibitive for most markets. A USDA FMPP grant secured by The Kohala Center has helped defray these set-up costs for participating markets.

All of the markets have a central location where they swipe the EBT cards. Then markets use either a food bucks system or a receipt system that the customer redeems with the vendors. The restrictions regarding eligible items for purchase are the same as at the food store—customers can buy food items and seeds and plants that produce food, but they cannot buy hot food, food that will be eaten at the market, or any non-food items.

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According to Melanie Bondera, The Kohala Center’s FMPP project coordinator for Hawai‘i Island, “Low-income households on Hawai‘i Island spend 50 percent more than what their mainland counterparts spend on food. Increasing EBT access at farmers’ markets will respond to the immediate need of island residents to obtain fresh local food that will improve the overall health of their families.”

In addition to increasing access to fresh, locally grown food for island residents, the program is expected to increase demand for local food, and therefore income, for Hawai‘i Island farmers.

Learn more at www.kohalacenter.org/ebt or at participating markets.

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[photo caption: Leslie Nugent/Hawi]

The Hawi Farmers Market is one of the eight farmers markets now accepting EBT on Hawai‘i Island. Leslie Nugent of the North Kohala Eat Locally Grown Campaign runs the EBT Booth, swiping cards in exchange for “Food Bucks” that can be used to buy food at participating vendors.

[photo caption: Keauhou]

Mary Robblee and Selina Rodriguez man the EBT booth at the Keauhou Farmers Market. The market and EBT program is a project of the Kona County Farm Bureau. The Keauhou Farmers market in Kona is one of eight farmers markets now accepting EBT on Hawai‘i Island.