

Big Island Weekly

Seven Big Island Farmer's Markets Now Accepting EBT

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By Andrea Dean

Locally grown food has just gotten more affordable and accessible on Hawai'i Island with seven farmers markets now accepting EBT.

EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) it is what SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly called food stamps) recipients use to buy food.

The Kohala Center recently received a one-year grant from the USDA's Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP) to help six farmers markets on Hawai'i Island to accept EBT cards. The goal of this project is to increase access to healthy, nutritious food for people receiving SNAP.



The Hilo Farmer's Market, in operation since 1988, has been a national pioneer in helping to develop an EBT system that works for farmers markets. The Hilo Farmer's Market began accepting food stamps in 1995, but when the system changed from a paper food stamps booklet 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. In fact, the Hilo Farmers Market was the first farmers market in the nation to accept food stamps using the EBT system and still uses this system today.

With mentoring from Keith De La Cruz, Market Manager at Hilo Farmers Market, the S.P.A.C.E Market in Kalapana began accepting EBT, the second market on Hawai'i Island to do so.

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

In addition to the Hilo Farmers Market and S.P.A.C.E. Farmers Market in Puna, the following markets are now accepting EBT: 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 and Keauhou Farmers Market in Kona. The Hawi Farmers Market in North Kohala will begin to accept EBT in October.

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 on what you can and can't purchase with EBT are the same as at the food store—you can buy food items and seeds and plants that produce food, you can't buy hot foods, food that will be eaten at the market or any non-food items.

According to Melanie Bondera, 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, accepting EBT at farmers markets is also expected to increase demand, and therefore income, for local farmers. This is a critical step in helping to grow a more localized food system on Hawai'i Island.

Learn more at kohalacenter.org/ebt or visit your local farmers market.

Photo: Mary Robblee and Selina Rodriguez manning the EBT booth at the Keauhou Farmers Market, the market and EBT program is a project of the Kona County Farm Bureau. Courtesy photo