



A Token of Appreciation: At Everyone's Harvest farmers markets, shoppers can swipe their EBT cards for wooden dollars with which they can buy fresh produce.

Crunchy Credit

Farmers markets grow with electronic food stamps.

By [Nic Coury](#)

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Everyone's Harvest takes its name seriously: Since the Marina-based nonprofit began running local farmers markets, it has allowed low-income people to use electronic benefit transfer cards (EBTs) – the modern version of federal food stamps – at its markets in Pacific Grove, Marina and Greenfield.

They're not the only ones. Of 17 markets in Monterey County, six accept EBT or are working to provide it soon. The rest of the markets, except the Old Monterey marketplace on Alvarado Street, accept food coupons provided by the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. Any market interested in using EBT must register with federal – and state-level agencies, which takes six weeks to complete.

The Salinas-based Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA), which provides education and business opportunities for farm workers, acts as a liaison for local markets looking to implement EBT.

OF 17 MARKETS IN MONTEREY COUNTY, SIX OFFER EBT.

“We recognized the great opportunity to work with markets in an area that have a lot of low-income people,” says Gary Peterson, ALBA's deputy director. “It was quite obvious for it to happen in areas like Salinas.”

One-third of Monterey County residents, or 134,000 people, are eligible to apply for food assistance (although 43,000 of them don't use it).

According to ALBA, the average monthly benefit is around \$200 per person, which means a total of \$18.2 million in active countywide EBT dollars per month – a potential windfall for farmers markets.

At Everyone's Harvest markets, EBT users swipe their cards at the information table, deducting the amount they want to spend. In trade, they get tokens worth a dollar each, which they use at the produce stands. Vendors later exchange their collected tokens for cash from the market manager.

“It is one more form for low-income families to access fresh, organic produce,” says Jessica McKillip, whose farmers market in the Alisal area of Salinas accepts EBT. “All of my vendors wanted me to offer it. It brings in another avenue of funds from people who previously couldn’t shop at markets.”

But farmers market organizer Joe Aliotti is skeptical that EBT can work for his six local markets, which include several in Salinas, one in Seaside and a future one in Carmel Valley. He prefers to offer low-income access through the WIC network, with uses a more literal food stamp system: booklets in which each sheet is worth \$2.

Peterson has approached Aliotti several times about using EBT, which is similar to WIC but with a few more benefits: It’s available to more people, it can be used for more products, and its electronic format makes it easier to track. But Aliotti doubts the system would be feasible for his larger markets.

“When you don’t have a definite answer from the people who are putting the program on, you let someone else do it first and try it out,” he says. “It is hard enough having six markets, let alone using wooden nickels and debit cards.”

As an incentive for more EBT users to shop at farmers markets, ALBA is offering any person who spends \$10 or more on tokens an extra \$5 for fruits and vegetables at participating Monterey County markets in Marina, Pacific Grove, Soledad, Greenfield, King City, and at Salinas’ Natividad Medical Center.

Find your nearest farmers market and check its EBT status at www.tinyurl.com/montereymarkets

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