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Brett Melone: Buying local produce helps

By BRETT MELONE
Guest commentary
Updated: 12/15/2009 01:31:40 AM PST

The Buy Local Monterey initiative, sponsored by the city of Monterey and various other organizations, is welcome news, and I sincerely hope that many merchants benefit.

In a closely related effort, the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association, or ALBA, adapted the Buy Fresh Buy Local Campaign into Spanish, "Compre lo Fresco de Nuestra Region," to help farmers feature the value of fresh, local foods in farmers markets and other venues, and make the message accessible to Spanish-speaking consumers.

Our research indicates that all consumers, and perhaps especially low-income, Spanish-speaking consumers that have worked in conventional agriculture, have an interest in eating local, organic foods.

Working with more than 30 beginning farmers and low-income consumers locally, ALBA seeks to increase the chances of success of beginning and minority farmers. This places us at the convergence of farm, food and economic development policy.

The farmers in ALBA's farm business incubator have a clear stake in expanding sales at farmers markets. And so do all of us. We all share the burden of rising health care costs related to diet-related disease (closely correlated to unhealthy food environments). The benefits of farmers markets are well-known and often profound, with the power to improve health and revitalize the local economy.

Many more local residents could benefit from our region's farmers markets. California Food Policy Advocates has found that more than

43,000 Monterey County residents are eligible for SNAP (food stamp benefits) but do not participate for various reasons.

With an average benefit of \$112 per month, the local food economy is relinquishing \$4.8 million of federal assistance each month. If only 5 percent of these unclaimed benefits were used at five farmers markets in Monterey County, each market would average \$12,000 per week in additional sales.

ALBA and agency partners have assisted markets in acquiring and using the electronic system provided by the state to accept food stamp benefits via EBT debit card. As part of their community service and commitment to local economic development, the Marina, Pacific Grove, Greenfield and Soledad farmers markets all accept EBT cards. But there are many more local farmers markets that do not.

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In fact, only about 20 percent of farmers markets in California accept EBT cards. Which is why ALBA is sponsoring state legislation (AB537 by Assemblyman Juan Arambula, D-Fresno) to expand EBT acceptance in farmers markets by 2012.

Next year, ALBA will be rallying support for this issue by shepherding AB537 through the state Legislature.

The myriad benefits of farmers markets and the healthy food they offer should be available to all, including working families who depend on food stamps. Local farmers would welcome the additional business. If you agree, please join us in letting our elected representatives know and Buy Fresh Buy Local.

Brett Melone is executive director of ALBA in Salinas.

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