



# Assessing the Economic & Community Impacts of Washington Farmers Markets

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WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY | CENTER FOR SUSTAINING AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES | SMALL FARMS PROGRAM

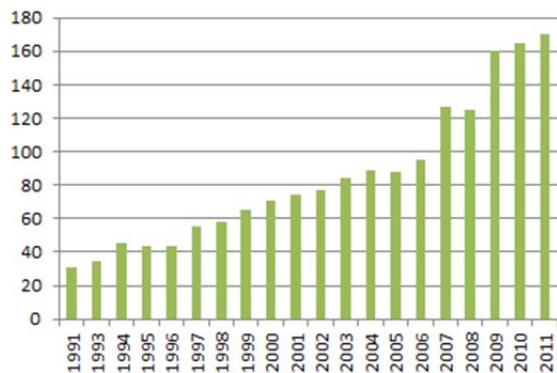
## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Northwest, small and medium sized farms struggle to achieve profitability. Direct marketing to the end-consumer shows promise for capturing added value from farm products. Farmers markets constitute one of the most visible cornerstones of farm-direct marketing. Nationally, the total number of farmers markets has increased dramatically.

There are now over 7,864 farmers markets in the US, growing 9.6% in the last year alone (USDA). Nationally, direct to consumer food sales increased threefold over 15 years from \$404 million in 1992 to \$1.2 billion by 2007 (USDA). Despite the consistent growth, very little has been documented about farmers markets' economic impacts and challenges for vending farms, neighboring businesses, host communities, and market organizations.

Figure 1:

### Farmers Market Growth in WA: 1991-2011



Source: WSFMA member data

In 2009, a WSU research team received a three-year, USDA AFRI grant to enhance farmers markets as profitable outlets for diverse small and mid-sized farms and valuable community assets by:

- 1) documenting the current capacity of WA farmers markets to improve farmer income, the environment, and communities;
- 2) identifying and addressing barriers to participation in farmers markets for women, immigrant, minority, and limited resource farmers;
- 3) assessing and improving organizational and management strategies; and
- 4) building long-term capacity to address ongoing research and educational needs of farmers market organizations.

## PARTICIPATORY METHODS

We have used a participatory, collaborative and transdisciplinary approach for this research project. The seasonal, informal and community-based nature of farmers markets make collecting data in a consistent and precise way very challenging. Building strong relationships with market managers, vendors, regional

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market networks, statewide and local partners is vital to this research project. We have established a Washington “Farmers Market Action Team” that helps to refine priorities, inform research methods, and share key information. Current members include the Washington State Farmers Market Association and WSDA Food Safety & Consumer Services, Neighborhood Farmers Market Alliance, Cascade Harvest Coalition, King County Agriculture Program, individual farmers and dedicated market managers.

### RAPID MARKET ASSESSMENTS & CASE STUDIES

To date, the project has trained over 136 people in market research methods and conducted fourteen Rapid Market Assessments (RMA) throughout the state, including four representative case study markets: Broadway (Seattle), Bremerton, Okanogan, and Yakima. RMAs utilize three integrated components to evaluate the market and characterize the customer base: customer counts, a customer dot survey, and direct observation by a participatory research team. The RMA method builds on Rapid or Participatory Rural Appraisal that has been well-utilized by international development practitioners to engage local community members in studying and solving their own problems (see Chambers 1992).



Figure 3. Dot survey at the Vashon Farmers Market, 2010.

Figure 4: Primary Reason for Shopping at Farmers Market (N = 15,477 shoppers)

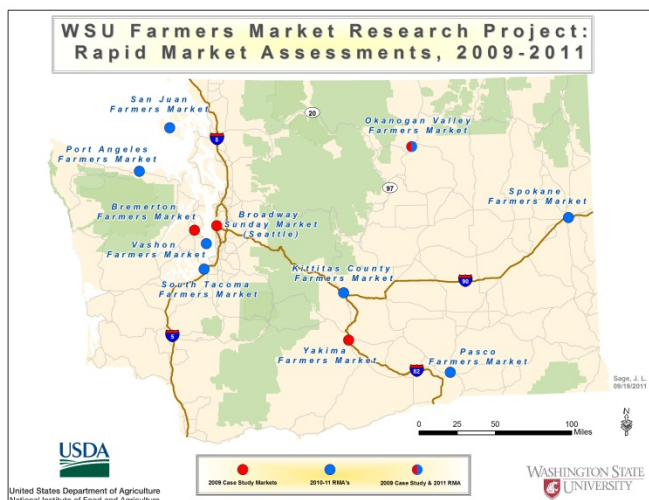
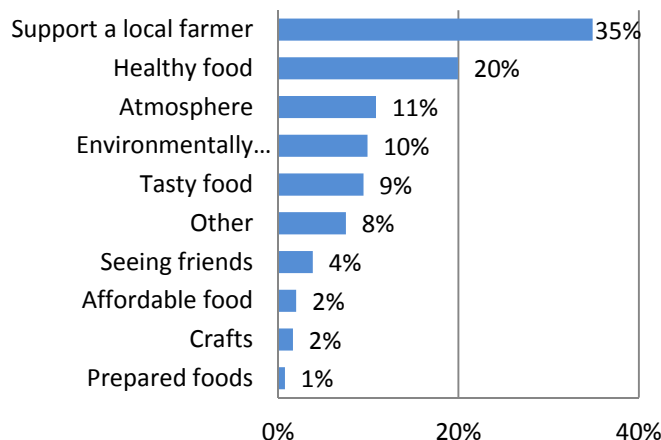


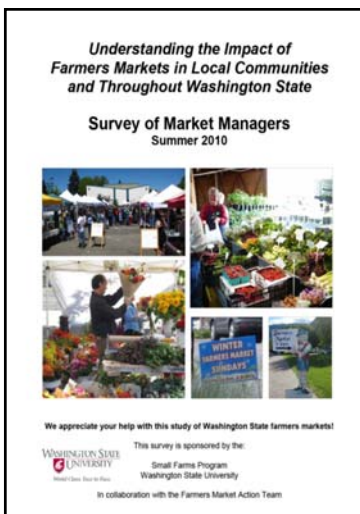
Figure 2. WSU Farmers Market Research Project Rapid Market Assessments: 2009, 2010 and 2011. Map by Jeremy Sage. Also see “Tools for Rapid Market Assessments” (Lev, Brewer and Stephenson 2008).

Figure 5: Average Shopper Spending at Market and Other Businesses from 14 RMAs



## FARMERS MARKET MANAGER SURVEY

In August 2010, we launched a Market Manager Survey with over 70 questions to gather economic and organizational data for the 2009 market season. The survey was sent to all 160 farmers market locations



identified in the state. We defined a farmers market as having at least 5 farmers selling their products. The survey was promoted heavily to managers who could respond either by mail or Internet. In addition, a phone survey was also completed to improve results and capture qualitative data.

Market Manager Survey results are currently being analyzed to determine:

- Total number of Washington farms employing farmers markets as a core business strategy;
- Conditions and barriers to vendor and market success;
- Best management practices to optimize farm sales;
- Accurate sales data statewide and per market;
- Role of professional market managers; and
- How to optimize markets' organizational development, capacity and sustainability.
- Successful strategies for serving low-income communities.

## FARMERS MARKET FARM VENDOR SURVEY

In Spring 2012, we launched a survey of all farm vendors who sold at farmers markets in 2011. The list had to be created by working with partners and market managers to identify all farm vendors. In all, we found over 1,300 unique farm businesses who rely in some way on farmers markets as an outlet for their products.

The survey focuses on basic information about farmers' farmers market activities, sales, and farm operation. This is the first time we will have a complete set of data about this group of producers. Even the Census of Agriculture only has one question related to direct marketing. To date, we have a 39% response rate.

## INITIAL FINDINGS

- Our project has located 160 markets in Washington, operating in 36 out of 39 counties.
- Estimated 2011 sales from all markets combined conservatively totaled \$ 50 million.
- One of the strongest markets in the state reported average daily sales of \$1,247 per vendor and total market sales of over \$3.3 million in 2010.
- Increasing numbers of markets are adding the capacity to accept EBT (food stamps) and credit/debit cards as an important way to meet shopper needs.
- Markets can catalyze economic activity through farm sales, farm-based job creation, and enhanced sales at nearby businesses.
- Findings suggest a strong correlation between management strategies, profitability, and the long-term sustainability of the market.



**Figure 6.** Assessment team at the U-District Farmers Market, August 2012.

## Acknowledgements

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