

## Fresno-area small farmers eager to accept food assistance benefit card

By Robert  
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Will Scott, who farms in southwest Fresno, attended the National Hmong American Farmers conference Thursday in Fresno and was pleased to hear government officials talk about the benefit card used as part of the USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP. In California, the program is known as CalFresh. Scott said accepting the benefit card makes a lot of sense to any small farmer: "This gives us a chance to sell more. And people get the benefit of what we sell." SILVIA FLORES — Fresno Bee file photo |[Buy Photo](#)

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- *National Hmong American Farmers conference was held in Fresno on Thursday.*
- *Farmers attending the conference learned about food safety, labor regulations and compliance inspections.*
- *One of the more popular seminars was on how to participate in the food assistance benefit programs.*



A push by federal officials to encourage farmers and farmers markets to participate in the government's food

assistance program was well received at Thursday's National Hmong American Farmers conference.

The event, held at the Ramada hotel in north Fresno, attracted a diverse group of about 200 participants, including Asian, Hispanic and black farmers. Experts and government officials provided information about worker safety, national farm policy, food safety and compliance inspections.

U.S. Department of Agriculture and state representatives spoke to many farmers and farm market managers about accepting the benefit card used as part of the USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP. In California, the program is known as CalFresh. The program encourages families to buy healthy and nutritious food. And one way to achieve that is by improving access to farmers markets or farmers who sell directly to the public.

On Thursday, the government set up a one-stop, sign-up process at the farmer's conference. The streamlined process took less than an hour for farmers to be approved. Federal officials acknowledged that one of the challenges they faced was the lengthy process. Farmers had to wade through the application online and wait up to 45 days to be accepted.

"We did a similar event earlier in the week and we signed up 83 farmers," said Andrew Riesenber, food security & obesity prevention team lead for the USDA's Food & Nutrition Service. "And we could surpass that today."

Riesenber said the USDA is working to get more farmer's markets, produce stands, and community supported agriculture programs approved to accept CalFresh. The USDA also provides grants for free wireless electronic benefits transfer (EBT) equipment.

Farmers said they were thankful they were able to sign up for the program. Federal statistics show that in 2014, CalFresh recipients got a monthly average of \$141 in benefits and spent more than \$3.8 million at California farmers' markets.

Mai Vang, of Fresno, said her family sells vegetables, herbs and fresh fruit at farmers markets in San Jose and Hollister and is often asked by customers if they can use their EBT card.

"We have had to say no, because we didn't take the card," said Vang of B. Vang Farms. "We were losing sales and we didn't want that anymore. Now, we can sell to our customers with the EBT card and give them the fresh vegetables and good food they want to buy."

Will Scott, who farms in southwest Fresno, said accepting the benefit card makes a lot of sense to any small farmer.

"This gives us a chance to sell more," Scott said. "And people get the benefit of what we sell."

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