University researchers’ farmers market studies help local growers thrive

*Faculty study habits of buyers and chefs as well as train farmers how to market fresh produce*

University of Nevada Cooperative Extension and other University researchers are teaming up to help Nevada communities establish more vibrant and sustainable farmers markets—giving Nevada’s growers new and better ways to get their produce into the hands—and mouths—of consumers.

The popularity of local farmers markets has increased in recent years, spurred by consumer demands for fresh organic products and concerns about the energy consumed trucking produce large distances from field to market. Over the last 10 years, the number of established farmers markets in Nevada has grown from just nine in 2000 to 25 in 2010.

Yet according to Ann Louhela, executive director for the Nevada Certified Farmers Market Association, local markets still face difficulties, particularly in attracting producers to venues.

In response, researchers from Cooperative Extension and the College of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Natural Resources have conducted a number of studies on farmers markets in recent years. They’ve analyzed the buying habits of consumers at farmers markets and they’ve interviewed dozens of high-end chefs. University researchers have also worked with farmers market organizers on strategies for recruiting and keeping volunteers, and they have conducted training across the state to help farmers manage the legal, marketing and financial risks associated with direct marketing the food they grow.

“We’re working to expand the outreach of producers,” said Margaret Cowee, research analyst with the Department of Resource Economics. “We want to encourage farmers towards marketing their products, rather than just selling to distributors.”

An important component of these strategies is to help producers understand the benefits associated with farmers markets. Farmers markets allow farmers to establish contacts with local restaurants and similar customers, and to help farmers establish the name and “brand” of their farm.

For Doug Taylor, a chef for Mario Batali, a
restaurant in Las Vegas, the pursuit of locally grown organic produce led to the creation of the Molto Farmers Market. After connecting with local farmers, Taylor began working with Cooperative Extension to connect local producers with local restaurants. The result was the Molto Farmers Market, a weekly event that draws not only chefs but the general public.

“As a chef, I wanted better food, better produce,” said Taylor. “Our goal is to make the connections with local business.”

According to Taylor, the overall effects of farmers markets are beneficial to both the consumer and the producer. Buying local produce cuts down on fuel and transportation costs associated with large distributors. Money that would otherwise be siphoned out of economies by large distributors and corporations is instead circulated back into the local community. As a result, farmers markets not only promote local economies, but also encourage healthy lifestyles.

“If people are buying and eating better foods at home, it’s going to put pressure on other restaurants and venues to do the same,” said Taylor.

About five years ago, Mary Farris, a Tonopah fruits and vegetables producer, took the initiative to start a farmers market in that small town about half way between Reno and Las Vegas. With the help of the Cooperative Extension, the Tonopah Farmers Market has grown from a customer base of 80 people to more than 500 visitors weekly. Of the 33 participating vendors, nearly a third are from outside the Tonopah area, with some farmers coming from as far away as Hawthorne and Yerington, 150 miles north.

A big part of that market’s success has been the dedication of its volunteers. A handful worked with Farris at the beginning, but with the help of Cooperative Extension educator Amy Meier, that volunteer base has grown to 35. Meier used her success with those volunteers as the basis for a publication that has helped other farmers markets recruit and retain volunteers.

The Tonopah market also hosts events such as harvest festivals, chili contests and 4-H demonstrations. Community involvement and education are important elements employed by Farris in her venue.

“In addition to organic produce, we emphasize the education of consumers,” said Farris. “We design articles, handouts, signs, tastings and recipes all catering to consumers. As a result we’ve had two to three times the return.”

To help build relationships with consumers, university researchers have pushed for farmers to start labeling and certifying products. The certification of organic or pesticide-free produce is a way to target specific consumer markets, said Cowee. The use of farm names and logos in marketing also allows for consumers to identify with a particular brand.

“When used in situations where the producer has direct contact with the customer, using the farm name helps to create a relationship between the product and the customer,” said Cowee. “If the product meets or exceeds the customer’s quality expectations, they will look for that label again in the future.”

Taylor would like to see markets become more sustainable, with less reliance on volunteers for support. Many markets have begun to accept food stamps for produce, an idea Farris would like to see adopted by the Tonopah market. In either case, farmers markets continue to serve as a reflection of local identity.

“Every market is original, unique,” said Farris. “We serve individual needs and qualities.”

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The University of Nevada Cooperative Extension has been working with local communities to improve and reinvent farmers markets by:

- Developing new means of volunteer recruitment and retention
- Providing marketing incentives for participating farmers and producers
- Analyzing specific consumer demographics and demands
- Developing marketing strategies to meet consumer demands
- Encouraging sustainable and profitable market dynamics
- Expanding avenues for promoting and advertising local markets

LOOK ONLINE
To watch a feature video on the Molto Farmers Market, visit: www.unr.edu/nevadasilverandblue