



ProducePERKS

Interested Party Testimony- House HHS Subcommittee HB 166- State Operating Budget May 6, 2019

Chair Oelslager, Vice Chair Scherer, and Ranking Member Cera - Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 166, the State Operating Budget, in support of Produce Perks Midwest's funding request which would appropriate \$500,000 in each fiscal year within the Department of Job and Family Service's TANF Block Grant for Produce Perks to expand services to reach more SNAP recipients across the state.

My name is Amy Baskes and I am the Founder of Amy Baskes Consulting and I oversee Produce Perks at 20 locations in central Ohio farmers' markets and retail groceries. I am here to offer another perspective of Produce Perks' impact, that of the farming community.

The Produce Perks program has a direct and positive affect on Ohio's farmers. Produce Perks doubles the purchasing power of SNAP consumers to purchase fresh, healthy fruits and vegetables from Ohio farmers markets and grocery-retailers across the state by providing a \$1-for-\$1 match for SNAP consumers to buy healthy, local produce.

For increasingly more Americans, eating locally-produced foods is becoming a priority. Family farmers are interested too, because local and regional marketplaces often offer better prices for farmers' products, which helps us to sustain their businesses and feed themselves. If consumers want local food and farmers want to grow it, why then does demand still far outstrip supply? The short answer is: connectivity. Farmers need both infrastructure and peer and professional networks in order to enter and succeed in new marketplaces.

The 2018 Farm Bill took many steps at addressing this and, importantly, reauthorized the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives (FINI) program to provide \$250 million over 5 years. Additionally, the Farm Bill instructs USDA to allow farmers markets to operate an individual EBT (electronic benefits transfer) device for accepting SNAP benefits at more than one location. This change resolves a long-standing barrier to operating efficient and cost-effective SNAP EBT systems at markets, a problem farmers and food advocates have been trying to address for years.

These two changes are huge for Produce Perks and give them the ability to reach more Ohio SNAP consumers. Even with 166% growth from 2017 to 2018, Produce Perks is still only reaching 1% of Ohio's SNAP population, leaving some of our most vulnerable counties still struggling with access to fruits and vegetables.

Produce Perks is a way that our farmers can serve the SNAP customer and increase their bottom line. In 2018, \$319,621 of Produce Perks incentives were redeemed on fresh fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets and small retailers. This represents income that otherwise is not available to local farmers because of the difficulty of reaching SNAP customers and accepting EBT.

At the 79 Farmers' Markets sites accepting Produce Perks in Ohio in 2018, 509 farmers redeemed \$143,313 of Produce Perks incentives. On average, these farmers earned an extra \$282 from Produce Perks, an amount equal to their vendor stall fee for the summer, a small improvement to their pack shed, or an additional 25 hours of labor paid to workers on their farm. I likely don't need to tell you that farmers operate on very slim margins and every opportunity for income like this counts.

But farmers aren't just interested in Produce Perks to increase profits. They are deeply concerned with the health and wellbeing of their fellow farmers, many of whom are low-income themselves, and all are members of our community.

Bryn Bird, of Bird's Haven Farm in Licking County shared, "At the Canal Market District in Newark, OH, Produce Perks accounted for close to 40% of our annual market sales. This gave us an entirely new market to sell to, increased our overall profits for the year and helped us bring local produce to a community that had been without local produce for decades. We have countless stories of customers who had never tried ground cherries but only because of Produce Perks they were able to buy them, found their kids loved them, and began making special trips each week for their child to enjoy a favorite healthy snack."

Every dollar that our state invests in Produce Perks has a double impact – it's a dollar of fresh produce on Ohio family's plates and a dollar in the local agricultural economy.

I ask that you support our amendment of \$500,000 in each fiscal year within the Department of Job and Family Service's TANF Block Grant for Produce Perks to expand services to reach more SNAP recipients – and farmers - across the state. I can answer any questions at this time.

Thank you
Amy Baskes
Founder, Amy Baskes Consulting