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Tulsa campaign seeks to boost farmers' markets

[Journal Record, The \(Oklahoma City\)](#), [Mar 7, 2007](#) by [Kirby Lee Davis](#)

Some executives fear the efficiencies of today's high-tech distribution and retail systems have blinded consumers to the billions of dollars they're shipping out of the local economy.

Case in point: Oklahomans spend an estimated \$4 billion each year at grocery outlets for food grown and prepared outside the Sooner State, said Doug Walton with the Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture.

Another \$4 billion goes toward dining out - "and most of those dollars end up going outside of the state," said Walton.

To help counter such trends, the Kerr Center in Poteau paid \$1,500 to bring the national "Buy Fresh Buy Local" campaign to Oklahoma. Walton, Oklahoma's coordinator for the program, said its long-term objective is to boost profitability for state farmers by creating additional markets for their produce.

It also educates the consumer while helping fill a national security and supply role, said Timothy Schlitzer, executive director of the program's sponsor, the Food Routes Network in Arnot, Pa.

"It's a win-win situation for everyone involved," said Chris Emerson, who with her husband Jeff operates the Tulsa-based health foods producer and retailer Naturalfarms. "It gives consumers better quality goods, it's better for the farmers, and it's keeping your money in Oklahoma, where it all belongs anyway."

Still in its organizational phase, Walton said the Buy Fresh program will focus this first year on helping build the farmers' market sector in Tulsa. Usually running from mid-April to mid-October, that niche has struggled through many failed attempts to sustain business, either due to lack of farmer participation or poor management.

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"It's really about growing a local food economy and being nimble enough to support that effort," said Walton.

While agreeing with that assessment, Howard Leleux, president of the decade-old Cherry Street Farmers' Market, said the farmers' market sector has shown some signs of strengthening. Broken Arrow and Jenks have nurtured markets, and operators have discussed adding one in downtown Tulsa.

Sustainable Green Country, a supporter and coordinator of the Buy Fresh program, will hold its first vendors meeting today to add a farmers' market in Tulsa's Pearl District. On March 27 it will seek a special exemption from the Tulsa Board of Adjustment to operate at Centennial Park.

Even so, Walton said Tulsa has struggled to maintain a "moving target" of about four to six such markets at any given time, none operating year-round. Estimating their annual sales becomes even more hairy, since participating farmers often handle their own transactions. Walton projected the overall sector could account for \$2 million or more in sales; Leleux estimated participants at his market may generate \$500,000.

"We're one of the few fortunate ones to keep it going," Leleux said of Cherry Street's success, operating from April's second Saturday through October's first Saturday in the Jason's Deli parking lot. His organization hopes to add a farmers' market in Tulsa's Brookside area. But even their market has seen problems with farmers not growing enough supply to meet consumer demand.

"Our problem is often just a limited supply of adequate growers," he said, "and getting them to plan adequate production."

While participants may plan events and other objectives, Walton said the Buy Fresh program's primary task this year will be to compile a guide of farmers' markets in the Tulsa area. His hope would be to distribute 50,000 to 100,000 copies, although funding will determine that. He also intends to establish a home for the guide on the Internet.

Even as it develops a funding base and its Oklahoma logo, Walton said Oklahoma's Buy Fresh program has drawn support and coordinating efforts from the Oklahoma Sustainability Network and Sustainable Green Country, two organizations that support regional social, economic and environmental efforts.

"We're hoping that as these farmers' markets start increasing, we'll start increasing the number of producers who will become more profitable and they'll start expanding their production," said Rita Scott, president of Sustainable Green Country.

Next year the Buy Fresh program will seek one or more additional communities to participate, Walton said.

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While none of the programs target her business, Emerson welcomed the Buy Fresh initiative for helping restore balance in the agricultural economy. Schlitzer echoed that, noting rising fuel prices have nullified many of the cost advantages overseas mass producers enjoy.

"An average tomato travels 1,500 miles," said Scott. "So when you and I go out to buy one of these tomatoes that usually come from California, it tastes terrible."

Through programs like the Pearl Farmers' Market and the Buy Fresh initiative, her organization hopes to connect more consumers with fresher, more nutritious and safer foods, all enhanced by festive music and educational components to improve today's urban communities.

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