

Colleen Labbe
Blackie's Farm Fresh Produce
LD 2093

Dear Senator Ingwersen, Representative Bill Pluecker and members of the Committee On Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry,

My name is Colleen Labbe and I am the General Manager of Blackie's Farm Fresh Produce in Auburn, ME. As your constituent, I would like to ask for your support of LD 2093. This bill will provide ongoing funding for the Farm Fresh Rewards program, allowing low-income Mainers to purchase fresh and local produce and supporting local farmers across the state.

Blackie's is a local area farm with our growing fields in Minot, ME. We have a year-round farmstand in Auburn, ME where we sell our own native grown produce, as well as a variety of fresh grown produce from other area farms, throughout the growing season in Maine. In the off season, we continue to acquire as much local produce as we can through our local relationships. We also provide a full lineup of farm fresh produce from a variety of sources so that our community has access to farm fresh fruits and vegetables year-round. We have an incredibly diverse customer demographic including low-income individuals and families, which includes a large population of New Americans. Without this program there are many barriers preventing recipients from accessing quality, healthy, whole foods. Since starting this program, we have heard from numerous customers that they are so thankful for the opportunity to stretch their dollars further while providing their families with healthier snack and meal options.

Not only is this important to our customers, it is also important to us as a farm and a local retail hub. Continuing with this program allows more money to funnel back into the local economy, which is essential for the many small farms that use our retail hub as a market for their local crops. We can all grow more food on our farms to provide to the increasing customer base which in turn leads to more accessibility for our community.

We have seen a large increase in SNAP benefits usage since implementing the Farm Fresh Rewards program in May of 2023. As more and more people learned about the program, especially with the SNAP Cliff, we saw the usage of the program increase rapidly. At the beginning of 2023, prior to the program's implementation, we were seeing average monthly usage numbers of around 350 transactions per month. As the program began to gain momentum, and people learned about the opportunity, we saw average monthly usage numbers closer to 850 transactions per month. At the height of the local harvest season, we saw over a 50% increase in SNAP/Farm Fresh Reward transactions.

We remain committed to providing easily accessible healthy, fresh foods to the plate of every Mainer and funding like this helps us continue to do so.

Thank you,
Colleen Labbe
General Manager
Blackie's Farm Fresh Produce
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