

# Local farmers' markets are growing strong

## *Participants profit by skipping the middleman*

Brian Lewis, The Province  
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If you've driven through the Fraser Valley on Highway 1 on any recent weekend morning, chances are you've shared the road with westbound pickups and vans carrying full loads of fresh fruit or vegetables.

If Mary Forstbauer of Chilliwack and her farming friends throughout B.C. have their way, this early-morning ritual of veggie-laden vans or fruit-filled pick-ups heading into the city is about to expand significantly.

The ritual reflects the increasing popularity of farmers' markets, which offer significant benefits for farmers and consumers alike.

And now, armed with a fresh injection of cash from Ottawa, the Chilliwack-based B.C. Association of Farmers' Markets is about to spread the word about this emerging agricultural sector.

Forstbauer, an organic farmer who is president of the association, says that while the heart and soul of farmers' markets is the sale of farm-fresh fruits and vegetables, they also include other products such as dairy, jams or honey along with local art and craft.

"A farmers' market is a gathering place where consumers meet and connect with those who make, bake or grow the products being sold," Forstbauer says.

"Re-sellers are not allowed and you won't find any imported products either," she adds. "A farmers' market is also a great opportunity for keeping families on the farm while providing consumers with fresh local produce." From the farmers' point of view, the farmers' market allows the producer to receive prices close to retail levels compared with selling to wholesalers.

"Where I might get \$1 for a product from the wholesaler, I can get a price comparable to the retailer of about \$2.50 at the farmers' market," Forstbauer tells me.

"Sure there are extra costs of transporting your product to the farmers' market, staffing your booth, buying scales, tents and tables—but you don't have to compromise on price like you do with a wholesaler.

"That's why some local farmers now opt to sell only through farmers' markets. But others do it through wholesalers as well," she adds.

One of the association's biggest challenges is to convince more farmers to break with the tradition of selling only to wholesalers and to try selling through farmers' markets as well.

"A lot of farmers are cautious at first because it's a new experience and there are some start-up costs," Forstbauer says. "But usually once they've tried it they like it, especially getting retail prices for their products and experiencing the personal contact with consumers." In fact, educating farmers on the benefits of farmers' markets is one of the tasks that the new funding of \$219,000 the association received last week from Ottawa will support.

These funds will also help the association develop a strategic marketing plan.

Looking ahead, Forstbauer sees increasingly strong growth for this still-developing sector of B.C. agriculture, but it's already come a considerable distance.

A 2006 study by the University of Northern B.C . found that B.C. farmers' markets contributed \$118.5 million annually to the provincial economy, with \$65.3 million per year spent at the markets and another \$53.2 million at neighbouring businesses.

It's not surprising then, that the volunteer-run, non-profit association— which currently has nearly 70 members— is searching for its first-ever full time executive director.

Market locations are available at [www.bcfarmersmarket.org](http://www.bcfarmersmarket.org).