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## As Farmers' Markets Go Mainstream, Some Fear a Glut



Matthew Cavanaugh for The New York Times

Maureen Dempsey weighing produce at a market in Florence, Mass. [More Photos »](#)

By [KATIE ZEZIMA](#)

FLORENCE, Mass. - John Spinetti started selling plump [tomatoes](#) and shiny squash at farmers' markets in the early 1970s and saw his profits boom as markets became more popular. But just as farmers' markets have become mainstream, Mr. Spinetti said business has gone bust.

Farmers in pockets of the country say the number of farmers' markets has outstripped demand, a consequence of a clamor for markets that are closer to customers and communities that want multiple markets.

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## [Farmers' Markets Spring Up](#)

Some farmers say small new markets have lured away loyal customers and cut into profits. Other farmers say they must add markets to their weekly rotation to earn the same money they did a few years ago, reducing their time in the field and adding employee hours.

"It's a small pie - it's too hard to cut it," said Mr. Spinetti, who owns Twin Oak Farms in nearby Agawam. Mr. Spinetti, who was selling vegetables and small fig trees, his farm's specialty, at the Wednesday market here, said his profits were down by a third to a half over the last few years.

Nationwide, the number of farmers' markets has jumped to 7,175 as of Aug. 5; of those, 1,043 were established this year, according to the federal Agriculture Department. In 2005, there were 4,093 markets across the country.

Here in the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts, where hand-painted signs for fresh vegetables dot winding roads and eating local has long been a way of life, some farmers and market managers are uttering something once unfathomable: there are too many farmers' markets.

This summer there are 23 farmers' markets in the area, which encompasses the Connecticut River Valley, according to the [Federation of Massachusetts Farmers Markets](#).

At the Wednesday farmers' market in Florence, shoppers perused plum peppers, freshly cut sunflowers, jars of homemade pickles and fragrant bunches of basil, rushing them into cars before a midafternoon thunderstorm

Rick Wysk, who spent the morning pulling beets out of the eight acres he tills at River Bend Farm in nearby Hadley, says his business at farmers' markets is half what it was five years ago.

"You have a certain amount of demand, and the more you spread out the demand, you're making less," said Mr. Wysk, who has been selling at markets for 13 years. He believes his business is further hurt by additional markets that opened this year in Northampton and Springfield.

"We're Western Mass. We're not New York City. We're not Boston," Mr. Wysk said. "We've got people, but not the population in the bigger markets."

More densely populated areas, however, seem to be where the problem is most acute. In Seattle, farmers have spent the last few years jumping from new market to new market. In San Francisco, there are simply "too many farmers' markets," said Brigitte Moran, the executive director of the Marin Markets in San Rafael, Calif.

"We have this mentality of, oh, we have a Starbucks on every corner," Ms. Moran said. "So why can't we have a farmers' market? The difference is these farmers actually have to grow it and drive it to the market."

Dale Davis, the owner of Stony Hill Gardens and Farm Market in Chester, N.J., cut three New Jersey markets this year because sales were down and the extra travel crimped his profit, and he blames a spate of new suburban markets.

"You send out these guys with fuel and they're picking and loading," Mr. Davis said in a telephone interview while selling squash and other vegetables at the Hoboken Farmers' Market, "and you can't end up on the long end for too long."

Stacy Miller, executive director of the Farmers' Market Coalition, a nonprofit organization that supports farmers' markets, said that the growth had been a boon to most communities and that many places still lacked markets that connect residents with fresh, healthful food.

But, she acknowledges, some markets are saturated. One reason is that more community groups want to open farmers' markets without doing "sufficient planning to ensure the demand is keeping up with the supply," Ms. Miller said.

In some places, new or small-scale farmers who cannot get into existing markets create their own and siphon off customers. Other communities do not have enough farmers to keep up with all the new markets that are opening, Ms. Miller said. According to federal agriculture officials, there are approximately 2.2 million farms nationwide; in 2006 there were 2.09 million.

To stay profitable, Ms. Miller said, farmers often sign on to a new market to hedge their bets, even if they do not know if the market will survive. Some do not. According to a study by Oregon State University, 62 farmers' markets opened in Oregon from 1998 to 2005, and 32 failed.

Trudy Toliver, executive director of the Portland Farmers Market, in Oregon, said there were signs that the city could be approaching too many markets, but she "hasn't even heard grumbings" about it from farmers or market managers.

In New York, farmers' markets in some parts of the state have started to "cannibalize each other's customer base," said Diane Eggert, the executive director of the [Farmers' Market Federation of New York](#). The organization has started distributing feasibility surveys to communities that want to open markets so they can figure out if the location has the farmer and customer base necessary to survive, Ms. Eggert said.

Jeff Cole, the executive director of Massachusetts Federation of Farmers Markets, said the organization had urged groups not to open new markets near thriving, existing ones, but could not order them not to because of state law. In one instance, a new market opened less than two miles from another, Mr. Cole said. Sales at the first one dropped by more than 30 percent.

The explosion in farmers' markets has also led some to question what exactly constitutes a farmers' market. Cindy Tobin, who, accompanied by her dog, was selling vegetables and baked goods at the Florence market, said she thought markets where vegetables were for sale alongside stands with antiques or clothing did farmers a disservice.

"People come to buy vegetables," Ms. Tobin said. "They're not buying earrings. That's what I'd like farmers markets to be."