

YAKIMA, PROSSER

Farmers Markets Take WIC Vouchers

By **LIA STEAKLEY**
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The Yakima and Prosser farmers markets are accepting a new type of currency this fall: peach-colored vouchers.

The change is a result of a last-minute addition to the state Women, Infants and Children's Farmers Market Nutrition Program by the federal Department of Agriculture.

In August, the federal agency notified the state's WIC staff that an additional \$380,000 would be available for the program, which supplies pregnant women and mothers with children under age 5 with vouchers to purchase fresh produce from participating farmers markets.

Created in 1989, the program operates in 23 counties and involves 49 farmers markets. About 55,000 mothers

PLEASE SEE **WIC** PAGE 3B

Thursday, September 30, 2004 • **3 B**

WIC/Markets, State Offices Interested

Continued from Page 1B

and children participate in the program.

Prior to this year, the closest markets accepting vouchers were in Pasco, Moses Lake and Ephrata.

Jean O'Leary, who helps to coordinate the program, said Yakima and Prosser were chosen as the next cities to offer the voucher because of a common interest in the program by local WIC offices and farmers markets.

"We've been wanting to expand this program for a number of years," said O'Leary. "We contacted farmers market managers in Prosser and Yakima, and they were very interested in participating."

The vouchers, which come in \$10 or \$20 packets and are valued at \$2 each, were distributed through the Yakima Nation, Yakima Valley Farm Workers

Clinic and Yakima Neighborhood Health Services' offices around the Yakima Valley.

Today is the last day for WIC clients to pick up the vouchers, and Oct. 31 is the final day to use them. But for those visiting the Prosser Farmers Market, the last day to shop is Oct. 23, because the market will be closed the last weekend of the month.

While most clinics have run out of the voucher packets, the Yakima Neighborhood Health Service still has a few left.

Typically, the vouchers are passed out to clients in July, which gives them about four months to shop. But since the additional federal money was provided to the state WIC office in August, the staff had to scramble to provide training to employees of the farmers markets.

The vouchers can be used only to buy fresh produce at the

markets. Processed foods, even nuts, are not approved.

Previously, WIC clients were offered coupons only to buy dairy and protein products such as eggs and peanut butter.

Cash or change cannot be given for the vouchers; they have to be used in their entirety.

Besides federal food stamps, the farmers market program is the only way for pregnant women or mothers with young children to receive aid for buying fresh vegetables and fruit, said O'Leary.

Gayle Wheeler, Prosser Farmers Market executive director, said she has already seen an increase in the number of young children and women frequenting the market.

It is uncertain if the program will continue at the Prosser and Yakima markets, said WIC's O'Leary.