

Operating a CSA and SNAP Participation

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has become a popular way for consumers to buy local, seasonal food, it bridges the gap between consumers and farmers, and can be a valuable option for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients with limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

CSA is a method of doing business. Generally, farms are the businesses operating CSAs and in doing so offer fresh food products through annual subscriptions, or a flat fee, that a customer pays up front once a year in exchange for a portion of produce that is typically delivered to a central location weekly or made available for pick up at the farm. Each portion is called a share and can include many different farm products in addition to fruits and vegetables, such as dairy and eggs. By entering into a CSA agreement, consumers are contributing to the success of the farm, and farmers are able to offer more fresh food options for customers.

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) authorizes businesses, including direct marketing farmers and non-profit food buying cooperatives, many of whom incorporate CSA as a mode of operation in their business portfolio. In order to participate in SNAP, all businesses must meet the basic FNS authorization eligibility criteria that can be viewed at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailers/store-eligibility.htm>.

In order to accept SNAP benefits, businesses first need to apply for a SNAP license. An application can be completed online at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/>. Alternatively, a paper application can be requested by calling our toll-free telephone number at: 1-877-823-4369; the paper application package is usually received within 3-4 business days.

SNAP is a needs-based Program; because SNAP clients have limited means and resources, they can neither afford nor risk payment for an entire growing season at the season's start. For this reason, if an authorized direct marketing farmer or producer, or a for-profit venture, elects to do business via a CSA, payment must be accepted as product is delivered (i.e. at the point-of sale rather than at the start of the season). Furthermore, SNAP benefits may not be used to pay any administrative or membership fees associated with operating a CSA. If a non-profit food buying cooperative is authorized and elects to operate a CSA, then payment may be accepted up to 14 days in advance of product delivery.

Many currently SNAP-licensed firms that have incorporated CSA operations into their business portfolio are successfully providing fresh products to SNAP clients. Questions about the SNAP authorization process, or eligibility to accept SNAP, can be answered by the SNAP Retailer Service Center at 1-877-823-4369.