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Posted on October 7, 2009 4:56 AM

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For the Collegian

Farmers markets see growth

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported earlier this week that farmers markets are on the rise across the nation, a trend State College farmers have already picked up on.

The USDA reported that more than 5,200 farmers markets operate nationwide, a 13 percent increase since the end of last year.

Local farmers markets on Locust Lane operate from late May to early November, but they have become so popular that Barrie Moser, president of the Tuesday market, has asked the Downtown Improvement District to extend them by two weeks. If approved, the Tuesday market will end on Nov. 17 rather than Nov. 3, and the Friday market will run through Nov. 20.

The USDA supports farmers markets as a part of its "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" initiative, encouraging local buying. In a press release, Agriculture Secretary of the USDA Tom Vilsack said farmers markets are easily accessible for locals.

"This growth demonstrates incredible interest consumers have in purchasing from local producers," Vilsack said.

Nationally, farmers markets have increased in popularity during the economic downturn. At a time when obesity and diabetes have become a national concern, farmers markets have been able to prosper as a source for "healthy, fresh, locally grown food," Vilsack said.

Moser, a retired research technician for Penn State, has been involved in the downtown market since 1993.

"Tomatoes are our most popular vegetable," Moser said. "But for fruits, it's definitely raspberries. People like raspberries."

The hardest part is growing the produce, Moser said. He begins planting some vegetables indoors as early as January. But business is good, he said.

"I think recently, people have had an awareness of things like the price of fuel," Moser said. "There are a lot more people wanting to grow their own produce."

Another farmer, Sarah Berndt, has seen an increase in sales as well.

"I think people are more aware that their food isn't checked like it used to be," she said. "If they want fresh and healthy, they buy locally."