Presentation Script: Pathways Out of the Farmers Market

Slide 1: Title Slide

Good [morning, everyone. My name is Francis Albright from Emory University, and I'm excited to share findings from our recent study titled Pathways Out of the Farmers Market: Understanding, Preventing, and (Sometimes) Embracing Farmer Churn. This work is the result of a collaborative effort with Dr. Hilary King, Annie O'Neill, and Isabel Staton. We're grateful to share this with you—especially those of you who live and work in local food systems every day.

Slide 2: Why Farmers Markets Matter

We know farmers markets are more than just places to buy food. They are economic engines. They are community hubs. They are essential to the sustainability of local agriculture and play a vital role in promoting health and wellbeing in our communities. They support small farms, preserve farmland, and help consumers connect directly with those who grow their food.

Slide 3: Why This Study?

Despite all this, much of the research has focused on consumers—why they shop, what they want. There's been far less focus on the experiences and decisions of the farmer vendors themselves. Our study flips the lens: We center the voices of farmers—especially those who have left the market.

Slide 4: Research Question

So we asked: What factors influence farmers' decisions to exit farmers markets? And how do these decisions shape pathways for adaptation or transition within local food systems? This question led us on a deep journey into farmers' lived experiences.

Slide 5: Objectives

We had three primary goals:
1. Understand why farmers leave.
2. Explore what they do next—where they go after leaving the market.
3. And most importantly—identify what markets can do to retain farmers or support transitions in ways that strengthen the food system.

Slide 6–7: Methods

We used a mixed qualitative approach, including:
- 83 in-depth interviews with farmers, managers, and others in the system;
- 24 instances of participant observation—we went to the markets, walked the

stalls, talked with people;
- And reviewed documents from 15 different markets.
This gave us both the stories and the structures shaping market exit.

Slide 8: Findings – Why Farmers Exit

From the data, three major categories of reasons emerged:
- Internal Factors – things within the market's control, like governance, fees, or operations;
- External Factors – broader things outside the market, like economic trends or climate events;
- Boundary Factors – these are where the personal and professional collide: burnout, caregiving, or life changes.

Slide 9–10: Internal Factors

Some farmers cited poor or inconsistent market management, unclear rules, or unaddressed conflicts. Others struggled with logistics—long drives, early mornings, and declining profitability.
Example quotes:
'We sold out every weekend—but others assumed our spot was the reason, so they'd set up there to push us out. It hurt my sales without helping theirs.'
'Or this:
'Every Saturday evening I had to milk the animals, load up, and be at the market by 9am—it was exhausting.'

Slide 11: Boundary Factors

Many stories were deeply human. One vendor said:
'For 25 years I missed most of my kids' baseball games. Once they grew up, it became a lot less fun.'
Others were simply worn out. These are not just business exits—they're life transitions. And many had no clear support as they made those decisions.

Slide 12: Where Do Farmers Go?

Importantly, not all exits are final or negative. Some farmers shift to:
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs),
- Online or hybrid sales,
- Direct-to-store or wholesale,
- Or simply take a break, to rest or reevaluate.
These are part of a larger adaptive landscape.

Slide 13: Addressing Internal Factors

So, what can markets do? First—improve what's within your control:
- Strengthen governance and define leadership roles.
- Involve vendors in decisions and communicate openly.
- Manage vendor mix fairly to avoid oversaturation and tension.
- And make market rules consistent and transparent.

Slide 14: Addressing External Factors

Markets alone can't fix economic pressures or land access—but they can:
- Advocate for supportive policies and funding,
- Partner with land trusts and co-ops,
- Work with local government to improve infrastructure—from storage to transportation.

These partnerships can help buffer the external shocks farmers face.

Slide 15: Addressing Boundary Factors

What about burnout or personal limits?
- Consider flexible scheduling or seasonal participation options.
- Help vendors adapt their business—offer support to try CSA or online platforms.
- And create wellness supports—shared labor pools, mental health resources, peer mentoring.

Because the personal side of farming can't be separated from the business side.

Slide 16: Implications for Policy & Practice

Our big takeaway: Not all exits are bad.
Some farmers leave because they grow, evolve, or pivot. That's okay.
But markets and communities can:
- Provide resources for transitions,
- Support innovative models,
- And build systems that allow farmers to step back—and return—without penalty or shame.

Retention doesn't mean holding on at all costs. It means supporting well-being and sustainability.

Slide 17: Reflections and Takeaways

So here's where we land:
- Understand why farmers leave—but don't assume every exit is failure.
- Build markets that are transparent, flexible, and inclusive.
- Support vendors not just as businesses, but as people.
- And rethink success—not just by attendance or profit, but by how well we care for those who grow our food.

Slide 18: Thank You

Thank you for your attention—and for the work you all do in your communities. We welcome your questions and comments.
If you'd like to connect or have questions, please reach out. We also have more findings online, and we'd love your feedback.

You may scan the QR code to give feedback]