Fresh fruits and vegetables? Key elements of a healthy diet, for sure. But many people of modest means, including those served by USDA's nutrition assistance programs, wonder if they can afford to buy healthy foods like the wonderful fresh produce that can be found in summer abundance at America's farmers' markets.

As USDA Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, I find that perception a source of concern because we work hard to encourage all Americans to make healthy food choices – particularly those participating in USDA's nutrition assistance programs, from kids in school to the more than 46 million people participating in USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Well, I'm pleased to say that a recent study by USDA's Economic Research Service, "Are Healthy Foods Really More Expensive? It Depends on How You Measure the Price," found that healthy food choices, like fresh fruits and vegetables, may be more affordable than people think.

They found that while it is easy to buy "cheap" calories by using less-healthy foods, there are many healthy food choices that cost no more per portion than less nutritious foods. Measured by the cost per portion, or per pound, grains, vegetables, fruit, and dairy foods are actually less expensive than most protein foods and foods high in saturated fat, added sugars, and/or sodium.

This is great news for all those trying to get by with a limited food budget – like people receiving SNAP benefits. You don't have to compromise on good nutrition just because money is tight. And just in time for summer.

If you haven't been to one of the nearly 7,200 farmers' markets across the country, I encourage you to do so. Farmers' markets offer shoppers a wonderful place to find the fresh fruits and vegetables and other local produce so important to a healthy diet – particularly now when farmers' markets are practically bursting with a bounty of summer produce.

USDA strongly supports farmers' markets. And the Food and Nutrition Service, which I oversee, has farmers' market programs for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants, for seniors, and for WIC mothers to help provide healthy food for them and their children.

We also encourage farmers markets to accept SNAP electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards, which makes it easier for SNAP participants to make purchases.

Farmers markets are the ultimate win-win situation. They're a win for customers because they can easily buy the freshest produce available. They're a win for producers because they are a convenient local market for their products.

They also provide a chance for customers and producers to meet face to face and build better understanding of community agriculture and what customers want.

So visit a local farmers' market today – you're in for a treat. And remember, fresh fruits and vegetables are not only the healthy choice – they're the affordable choice, too.