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Alex Piltch, left, buys a vegan meal from Patrick Maguire, who runs a cart at 8th and I streets in downtown Sacramento.

SAFE FOOD PERMITTED

County cracks down as more mobile food vendors are caught operating without approval

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KATHY ROBERTSON | STAFF WRITER

resh fruit cups, baskets of strawberries and homemade tamales sold from food carts sell well in the hot summer months, but are they safe to eat?

How would you know?

In Sacramento County, look for a sticker on the cart; this year it's green. That means the business has been inspected by county environmental health officials and meets health and safety code requirements.

Hundreds of mobile food vendors operate in the region without permits, county officials say, and the numbers are increasing. People are looking for a way to make ends meet, and a food cart seems like a quick and easy way to earn money.

A total of 739 mobile food vendors operate with permits in the county, but there may be up to 100 operating without permits, said Kelly McCoy, supervising environmental specialist for the

county. Weekends are the busiest and illegal fruit vendors the most common.

Vendors without permits have had no inspection or education by county officials, McCoy said.

It's a safety issue because food sold by vendors without permits may not be kept hot or cold enough. Vendors may not have access to a rest room or hot water,

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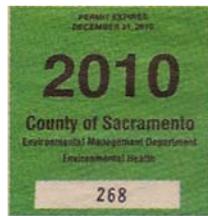
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FOOD | Officials worry that unlicensed vendors aren't sanitary, have competitive advantage

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soap and paper towels to wash their hands or utensils. Unwashed hands are the leading cause of food contamination, county officials say.

Many foods, including cut fruit, can grow bacteria such as salmonella if not kept below 41 degrees. Hot foods such as tamales and roasted corn must be kept at 135 degrees or more.

Transient vendors without permits have a competitive advantage over those who pay to play by the rules. Sources agree the downtown area is heavily monitored so the problem is more extensive farther out.

Some businesses take care of it themselves.

"There was a little cart in my parking lot with no license, no permit," said Tom Phoung, a co-owner at Welco Supermarket on Fruitridge. "I saw them and kicked them out."

FEW WORRY ABOUT FRUIT: IT'S 'HEALTHY'

More than 300,000 Americans are hospitalized and 5,000 people die from foodborne illness each year, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates.

Product recalls from established stores are common. Salinas-based Fresh Express, for example, voluntarily recalled certain romaine lettuce salad products last week after one package yielded a positive result for E. coli in a random test conducted by a laboratory for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

There have been four cases of alleged foodborne illness in Sacramento County this year, none confirmed.

Foodborne illnesses are under-reported generally, and people often fail to track the problem back to fruit, because it's considered "healthy," McCoy said.

"We've received several rotten food complaints, but the worst we have received this year is a mom complained that she found a cockroach in a bag of fried chips from an unpermitted cart selling tamales, corn and fried chips in the parking lot at Florin and Franklin," she added.

TOO RIPE FOR REGULAR SALES

It's tough to tell where food sold by vendors without permits came from, said Frank Carl, Sacramento County's agricultural commissioner. Produce sold by vendors without permits may be stolen, but often it is purchased from a produce market at reduced prices because it has limited shelf life.

In an effort to halt the sale of produce obtained through theft or other illegal means, the California Agricultural Commissioners and Sealers Association sponsored legislation last year that requires vendors to show proof of ownership if they try to sell more than 25 pounds of fruit, nuts and vegetables. That's 12 to 15 crates of strawberries or a couple of big watermelons.

"Our issues are a little different from environmental health. We want to provide a level playing field," Carl said. "It's also important for trace-back if there is a pesticide or control issue."

Carl gets some complaints about roadside vendors from grocery stores and farmers' markets, but "from John Q citizen? No. When we shut people down,

we get comments like why are you harassing a guy who is trying to make a living," Carl said. "Everybody is trying to make a living - but licensed vendors and farmers' markets are doing it legally and some roadside vendors are not."

The public may confuse itinerant vendors with local farmers selling local produce, said Dan Best, coordinator of Certified Farmers' Markets of Sacramento County.

"We're all supposed to be farmers, permanent or not, but these folks often come from Southern California or out of state and set up a block

or two from the farmer who grows strawberries here," Best said.

Insects are another problem. Parts of the region have been quarantined for the Oriental fruit fly, which can damage fruit, nuts and tomatoes.

"With a transient on the corner, we don't know exactly where the fruit comes from. We're concerned they will bring in

Sacramento County mobile food vendor permits

Numbers: There are 739 permitted mobile food vendors in Sacramento County, but there may be up to 100 vendors operating without a permit on any given day

Permits: Cost \$233 to \$554/year

Process: Fee payment and inspection by county environmental health officials to ensure the business meets health and safety code standards

Complaints: Sacramento County Division of Environmental Health at 916-875-8440

For more information: emd.saccounty.net

some insects we don't want," Best said.

HUNDREDS PLAY BY THE RULES

Stuart Campbell sells dishes such as Thai yellow curry, basil eggplant and sweet-chili tofu from a cart dubbed Happy Go Lucky Veggie Cuisine. It's parked at the corner of 8th and I streets at lunchtime.

He owns the business with Stephanie Allen and operates in partnership with Au Lac Veggie Cafe on Stockton Boulevard, where he picks up the day's food to serve the downtown crowd. Patrick Maguire was recently hired to help.

The business is the result of a "wild idea" by the former college student. Enjoying breakfast at Au Lac, Campbell had a "spontaneous vision of it being sold downtown." He tossed his name into the county lottery for corner spots 18 months ago and came up third of 175.

Campbell had to retrofit the cart with a 30-gallon water tank to meet county inspection, but made the changes himself to save money. He pays a permit fee of \$250 annually.

He doesn't worry about competition because he's got a good spot and serves a particular population that likes what he describes as "bistro gourmet vegan food." He recently printed 200 "frequenter" cards that were gone in a week.

Campbell still waits tables and has another side business that puts plastic flamingoes on people's lawns for a fee, but he makes \$100 to \$150 a day "selling healthy food to people and running my own business."

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