

COVID 19 Resources for Farms, Food Businesses and Food Systems Practitioners

by the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm, Food and Enterprise Development Program

This document shares resources regarding COVID-19 response within our food supply and value chain. Sections include general response and recovery process, and examples of best practices within farming, processing, farmers markets, and grocery, as well as potential distribution and virtual sales opportunities to consider. While this resource shares national best practices, highlights of examples and stories in Iowa are also included.

COVID-19 Impact

For the latest information and information on health and economic indicators, see [Impact Planning for COVID](#) and [Global Impact](#) from Esri Demographics.

The [World Health Organization](#) also has many resources and updates about the evolving global pandemic.

While our communities continue to react and respond to the on-going pandemic and disaster we are facing, many different innovative options have come up through policies, technologies, and general collective action. This is not a comprehensive overview of all aspects, but covers some best practices and options that individuals, businesses and communities may consider as they relate to food systems: farming, food businesses, and general distribution and connections.

Federal Policy

CARES Act:

In response to the on-going pandemic, the federal government put into law the [CARES Act](#) (Coronavirus Aid-Relief and Economic Security) on March 27, 2020. Many different press releases and publications have come out regarding the exact impact of the CARES Act. There is a lot yet to understand on how this will both impact and be available for individuals and businesses to utilize. Many of the organizations and departments receiving programming funds are still developing response protocols. It is important to reach out to local contacts (lenders, small business administration, local USDA offices, etc.) to understand direct access and options. (Penn State Extension, 2020; Newton, 2020)

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition has detailed their response within the blog [A Closer Look at Farmer Relief in Senate Pandemic Aid Package](#).

The CARES Act supports many different aspects, but those most closely associated with our food system and supply include:

- **Nutrition programs:** Funds for Child Nutrition programs (\$8.8 billion), SNAP (\$15.8 billion), Food Distribution on Indian Reservations (\$100 million), and the Commodity Assistance program (\$450 million). (Clayton, 2020)
- **Small Business support** (under 500 employees): \$349 billion were outlined in the "Paycheck Protection Program" within the SBA for loans and potentially forgivable loans. There are also local programs for immediate \$10,000 grants through SBA. (Penn State Extension, 2020) (Country Life, 2020)

- Small business loans and support are available in different forms. [The Small Business Owner's Guide to the CARES Act](#) reviews options.
- There is also an option for [Paycheck Protection Program](#)
- Who is eligible for [Small Business Relief Grants?](#)
 - A small business with fewer than 500 employees
 - A small business that otherwise meets the SBA's size standard
 - A 501(c)(3) with fewer than 500 employees
 - An individual who operates as a sole proprietor
 - An individual who operates as an independent contractor
 - An individual who is self-employed who regularly carries on any trade or business
 - A Tribal business concern that meets the SBA size standard
 - A 501(c)(19) Veterans Organization that meets the SBA size standard
- **Agriculture:** The CARES Act provides \$23.5 billion to America's farmers. Of that, \$9.5 billion is allocated specifically for specialty crops, producers who supply local food systems and farmers markets, restaurants and schools, livestock producers, and dairy farmers (Newton, 2020). An additional \$14 billion is dedicated to USDA to support farmers who experience a crash in commodity prices to COVID-19. This supports the Commodity Credit Corporation covering Price Loss Coverage and Dairy Margin Coverage in addition to natural resource conservation program, disaster assistance programs and Market Facilitation Programs (Country Life, 2020; Penn State Extension, 2020; Newton, 2020).

Farms

Production and Value-Added Agriculture Impact

Farmers experience impacts to COVID-19 in exceptional ways, including being essential workers. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture stated it well: "Agriculture's role is unquestionable: access to food is a right, we need local agriculture now more than ever" (Smith-Brubaker, 2020). Producers and food businesses will experience the impacts of COVID-19 in different ways; below are a few examples of responses from other states.

Food products and food safety: there is no evidence that COVID-19 is transmitted or associated with either food produced in the United States or associated with imported goods. It is also not suggested that food packing transmits the virus (Food and Drug Association, 2020). However, it is important to keep all surfaces and objects clean throughout the production and processing cycle. (FDA, 2020; Shaw, Coleman, & Naig, 2020; Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, 2020)

Economic impact: An [economic impact assessment](#) was completed for the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition in March 2020 to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on farms that sell into local markets. This study included farmers markets, farm to school, and food hubs serving other institutions and restaurants. The study predicts a "\$689 million decline in sales from March to May 2020, leading to a payroll decline of up to \$103 million and a total loss to the economy of up to \$1.3 billion" (Thilmany, Jablonski, Tropp, Angelo, & Low, 2020). According to the study, in context of farmers selling direct at farmers markets, only 8% of local food farms had an online marketplace in 2015. This indicates a need for farmers and food businesses to consider viable platforms to expand to support in the COVID19 response.

Below are a few examples to consider for your market or farm business:

- [Barn2Door](#)
- [Cropolis](#)
- [CSAware](#)
- [Farmers Web](#)
- [FarmDrop](#)
- [Farmigo](#)
- [GrazeCart](#)
- [GrownBy](#)
- [HarvestHand](#)
- [Harvie](#)
- [Local Line](#)
- [Local Food Marketplace](#)
- [Local Orbit](#)
- [Meat Suite](#)
- [Open Food Network](#)
- [Shopify](#)
- [WhatsGood](#)

Several organizations support outreach and building awareness of existing virtual markets; for example, Oregon Tilth presented a [webinar about online sales](#) platforms for direct-to-consumer sales. In addition to technology options and apps as shared above, there are additional innovative ways to reach customers and connect with other farmers through existing social media, email outlets, farm stands, etc.

There may be options to offer a [drop-off location](#) for pre-order and pick-up (on-farm or local area) (Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, 2020).

Initial suggestions for a new drop-off and ordering system include:

- Include cut-off times for purchases and specific instructions for pick-up
- Develop signage to market and create identity for space
- List contact information
- Log visitors' information and travel

Distribution and Markets

The economic impact assessment conducted by Thilmany, et. al., suggests a “\$689 million decline in sales over three months based on projections of losses from farm-to-school sales, food hubs that aggregate food from small farms to sell to restaurants and other institutions, and shuttered farmers’ markets” (Thilmany, Jablonski, Tropp, Angelo, & Low, 2020). A larger \$1.32 billion loss is estimated based on the systemic losses that would impact the broader community (Thilmany, Jablonski, Tropp, Angelo, & Low, 2020).

Farmers markets are in a tough spot, as some may continue to be open and viewed as an essential service, similar to grocery stores; others are being required to close based on city or state policy (Clougherty, 2020). Grocers are included in essential services to stay open and many states continue to allow farmers’ markets, processors, grocers, retailers, food banks and pantries, as well as gas stations and convenience stores to remain open (Smith-Brubaker, 2020).

Examples of best practices by state can be found in the following links: [California](#), [Texas](#), [New York](#), [Pennsylvania](#).

As we prepare in Iowa for farmers’ market season, the following are suggestions for markets based on best practices around the nation, with recognition given to efforts shared in Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, National Farmers Market Coalition, Berkeley Ecology Center, and Connecticut Department of Agriculture:

Farmers Markets:

- Events at markets should be cancelled (music, prepared foods, and consumption on site)
- Consider options for pre-paying and pickup from vendors

- If technology is not available, consider working with farmers to develop a list of contact information, "menu" of items for the week, etc., and allow customers to pre-order via phone or email
- Example: [Texas Farmers Market](#)
- Provide hand-washing stations throughout the market
- Do not allow pets, except service animals, to attend markets
- Create at least 5 feet of distance between each vendor booth

Customers:

- Include designated entrances and exits for customers
- Pre-order products if allowed from farms and other businesses
- Use indicators to show 6 feet of separation
- Wash hands frequently, between shopping at different stands
- Practice general sanitation and health guidelines from CDC
- Do not bring pets, except service animals

Vendors:

- Consider technology options for pre-ordering
- Do not offer samples or self-service for customers
- Offer hand sanitizer at booth
- Do not have tablecloths; have hard surface that can be cleaned easily
- Practice general sanitation and health guidelines from CDC

Restaurants and Food Businesses:

The National Restaurant Association [predicts](#) restaurant sales will decline by \$225 billion over the next three months, leading to a loss of 5 to 7 million jobs. The [results](#) suggest that 75 percent of restaurants that had been forced to close would not be able to reopen if the shutdown lasted two months (National Restaurant Association, 2020).

Consumers:

As consumers, we all eat; fresh food products are not a danger regarding the spread of COVID-19. For additional information on food storage and preparation with COVID-19, review the following resources:

- [Institute of Food Safety at Cornell](#)
- [FDA Emergency Preparedness - Food](#)
- [ISU Extension and Outreach - Food Safety](#)

Additionally, remember that you can continue to support your local food businesses and farmers. [Market Maker](#) is a resource that may be available in your location. While purchases are not available through the platform, it can help identify connections and direct relationships.

As we all continue into the uncertain future with COVID-19 response and recovery, consider ways to continue to support and be involved with your community while being mindful of social distancing practices.

Iowa State connections and support:

If there is interest in discussion on action steps, please feel free to reach out to our teams in the Farm, Food and Enterprise Development Program:

Small Farms: Christa Hartsook: hartc@iastate.edu
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