

ECONOMIC & POLICY UPDATE

VOLUME 20, ISSUE 9

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SEPT
2020

Specialty Crop COVID-19 Response Project



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Published: September 28th, 2020

USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), along with the cooperating research team led by the University of Kentucky's Dr. Tim Woods, Dr. Lilian Brislen, and Dr. Jairus Rossi, seeks to enrich existing efforts within local and regional food systems (LRFS) communities of practice who provide essential support to our nation's producers. This national project includes researchers from Colorado State University and the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development at Penn State University. During this moment of simultaneous disruption and rapid innovation, our project supports LRFS communities of practice by documenting and disseminating innovations and best practices developed on the ground and drawing on LRFS thought leaders to frame research on COVID-19 related shifts to

LRFS markets with the aim of supporting long term resilience. The project consists of 6 primary research collaborations and outputs:

- A *Resource Hub* with resources uploaded by 17 communities of practice spanning the local and regional food system.
- Short articles called *Innovation Briefs* that highlight rapid innovations sectors of the local food system have made in response to various restrictions brought on by COVID-19.
- *Impact Assessments* written by each community of practice that indicate positive and negative changes to their sector in the midst of COVID-19 alongside marketing innovations, economic impacts, and desired data and technical assistance.
- *Social Network Analysis* (to be completed April 2021) will be completed among sector members from the project's partner communities of practice. This will be completed to determine cross-sectoral connections and new relationships among project partners.
- *Consumer Survey* (October 2020) to aid project partners in understanding consumer behavior in relation to purchasing local food during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- A monthly *webinar series* to highlight the incredible pivots, innovations, and adaptations happening across the local and regional food system.

Each month of the project, a minimum of 2 Innovation Briefs will be published to the resource hub. These briefs highlight the project's aim of showcasing innovations that will help the LRFS in "Building Better Beyond," that is, building a more resilient food system for a post-COVID world. Innovation Briefs currently published include *Virtual CSA Fairs*, which details the decision of many CSA fair organizers to pivot to an online format in the Spring to continue to create grower-consumer engagement. In addition, *FRESHFARM's Market Tracker* describes the potential of data for farmer's market organizers. Each brief highlights an issue, innovation, and outcome of the change the organization(s) had to make in response to circumstances brought about by COVID-19.

Innovation Brief | Virtual CSA Fairs

Local Food Systems Response to COVID: Building Better Beyond

Healthy Spencers, April/October, University of Kentucky Extension, connecting with local food producers, virtually

ISSUE

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a model of food production and distribution that has been around for decades. It is a way for consumers to support local farmers and get fresh, seasonal produce. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the traditional CSA model, as many consumers have been unable to visit farms or pick-up points. This has led to a loss of income for farmers and a loss of access to fresh food for consumers.

INNOVATION

Virtual CSA Fairs have emerged as a new way for farmers and consumers to connect. These fairs are held online, often through social media or dedicated websites. They allow farmers to showcase their products and share their stories with consumers. Consumers can browse the fairs, place orders, and pay for their shares online. This has helped to maintain the CSA model during these challenging times.

OUTCOME

Virtual CSA Fairs have provided a lifeline for many farmers and consumers. Farmers have been able to continue their work and share their products with a wider audience. Consumers have been able to continue to support local farmers and get fresh, seasonal produce. Virtual CSA Fairs have also provided an opportunity for farmers and consumers to connect and build relationships.

Virtual CSA Fairs

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) models have grown in popularity in recent years. In CSA programs, consumers are directly connected with farms in their area. Typically, consumers paid monthly prices to receiving produce. By paying upfront for a season's worth of produce, many other "real" called products, consumers share some of the risks and benefits of farming with the farmers. Over time, the term CSA has come to incorporate a wide-range of models in which consumers purchase produce and other goods directly from farms. Promoted benefits of participating in a CSA include knowing where your food is grown and who has handled it, consuming local seasonal produce, and reduced trips to the grocery store.

CSA fairs provide an opportunity for farmers to network with potential CSA members. Fairs have been held around the country, in which farmers gather at a farmers' community center or other local and well-attended, you can share their farms and explain to consumers the type of operation and products that they will have the upcoming season. By having an event in which multiple farms can be represented in one place, consumers are able to find a CSA share that makes the most sense for them. For farmers, CSA fairs provide an opportunity to share information with others, why they farm, and what their products.

This year, in light of COVID-19, many more virtual CSA fairs were not able to happen. The country-wide

Meet the Farmers! Market Tracker ONLINE

Market Tracker is a national tool for farmers to track their sales and share their stories. It is a free, online platform that allows farmers to create a profile, list their products, and share their stories with consumers. Market Tracker is a great way for farmers to reach a wider audience and build relationships with consumers. It is also a great way for consumers to find local farmers and support their work.

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Building Better Beyond: opportunities and considerations

Foundational Success

- Pre-established partnerships and existing networks with access for information sharing contributed to the organizational ability to continue core and self-made their work.
- Dependable marketing and communication channels, organizational ability to access and quickly coordinate changes in the event, flexible about the new scene, and virtual participants in the event.
- Engaging with local food, virtually

The virtual CSA fair, though challenging, was ultimately seen as a success by organizers. They were able to quickly pivot their events to a virtual space, to help, engage more people now easily. However, some organizers expressed concern for a "virtual fatigue" in relation to existing opportunities for consumers to engage with the local food system virtually.

Consideration Moving Forward

- Organizers explored a significant number of CSA members for their partner farms this year. Will this kind of interest in CSA and local food more broadly be sustained in a post-pandemic world?
- How can organizational networks and farmer-organizer relationships be strengthened?
- Though the events were able to reach large numbers of people online, what about the people for whom we were not able to reach?
- How will the local food system adapt if, post-pandemic, consumer preferences continue to favor more local food?
- How can farms and organizations address issues of consumer confusion if current social distancing guidelines remain into the next growing season?

In addition to these Innovation Briefs, each of the 17 communities of practice have written an initial impact assessment in which sector leaders have detailed COVID's economic, logistic, and social impact on their respective sector. These will be updated throughout the project, as sector response

and impact evolves over the coming months. These impact assessments can be found on the project website, alongside the innovation briefs and COVID-19 resources uploaded by the communities of practice.

The project's monthly webinar series begins in October with a panel discussion from local food systems leaders from the National Farm to School Network, the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network, and the Wallace Center at Winrock International. The panel will be discussing "marketing innovations when communities eat at home," focusing on market channel shifts and adaptations the local food system made in response to the closure of schools, restaurants, and institutions. This webinar series will feature a panel discussion on a different topic the third Monday of each month at 1 pm EST.

Upcoming Webinar

Marketing Innovations When Communities Eat at Home

OCT. 19TH | 1 PM EST

For more information, visit the project website: <https://lfscovid.localfoodeconomics.com/>

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