

## Local farmers retooling how they sell, seeking new customers to weather virus shutdown

The beginning to the 2020 farming season has been jolted, with farmers dodging not only the typical rain showers, but also a raft of challenges due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Three primary outbreak-related issues include loss of certain markets such as metropolitan restaurants and farmers markets, concerns over farmer safety and food safety to avoid spreading the virus, and an urgent need to shift to online marketing and either drop-points or doorstep delivery.

While the coronavirus has affected all farms in some way, the effect has not been even across farms nor even within farms. Here is some of what we know so far.

First, farm markets have been disrupted. Closure of many farmers markets and restaurants, particularly those in high-value urban areas, has meant a significant change in the market landscape. Many farms in the four-county Thurston, Lewis, Mason and Grays Harbor region rely on metropolitan markets in Seattle, Vancouver and Portland. Loss of those markets means a major shift to more local and non-restaurant buyers.

Another pressing issue is that new farmer-to-customer connections are needed. Many farmers are reaching out to new customers through online marketplaces, developing “no-touch” practices for delivering produce to drop points and doorsteps, and building out box subscription programs known as CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture).

Some new and other tried-and-true platforms are available for customers to buy directly from farms. These include:

- A new resource called the “Farmers Basket” developed by the Thurston Conservation District with support from other organizations.
- The South Sound Community Farmland Trust 2019 and 2020 Farm Maps. The 2020 Farm Map is in the final editing stages, and broadly covers the four-county region.
- The “farm vendors” listing on many area farmers’ markets webpages. A couple of examples include the Tumwater Farmers’ Market and the Olympia Farmers’ Market.



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BY STEPHEN BRAMWELL

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- A formative Southwest Washington Food Hub working to set up an aggregated online ordering and direct-delivery platform that would allow purchase of farm goods and locally-made value-added products. This is being led by a recently chartered farmer steering committee and funded by a USDA-grant. Access to the Hub will be posted when available.

While some opportunities are available to support farm businesses, offsetting the impact will be complicated due to the variable nature of the disruption.

For example, revenue from on-farm wedding venues is in significant jeopardy, as is farm income from cut flowers, including the entire fate of tulip producers. And the dairy industry, already beleaguered, is bracing for sustained after-effects of market downturns that could further accelerate bankruptcies.

On the other hand, livestock producers who sell directly to grocery stores or by “shares” of quarter, half and whole animals are by some counts meeting sales targets and even struggling to meet increased demand. Similarly, farms that use box-subscription programs (by which consumers receive a box of produce over several week periods) see sales opportunity insofar as consumers are able to connect with these farms, which appears to be happening.

Yet new market options may not offset losses in other areas. Radical shifts in marketing plans ideally are not made over the course of days or weeks, as is now being required. Starting a new spring CSA, or selling to a new grocery account, may or may not compensate for loss of well-established restaurant accounts, and what can be highly lucrative single-day sales at busy farmers’ markets.

Happily, certain longtime relationships have remained faithful. The Olympia Food Co-op has bought new product and more product from local farms. Buying from grocers where sourcing is known is a good way to support local farms. Customers should also ask that grocers buy more from local farms.

Clearly, the effects of coronavirus on regional farms is barely understood and will evolve as the season progresses. Everything from shortages of twist ties, wax boxes, farm labor, and livestock feed, in addition to market changes, could emerge as problems.



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And the changes farmers are experiencing now may not be readily undone once the outbreak is over. Sales accounts take considerable time and effort to establish, but once lost may be very difficult to win back.

In this climate of uncertainty, supporting the region's farmers now, during the coronavirus outbreak, and later once things pass, will be more critical than ever. We need to launch a new wave of direct support for our region's farmers if we want to ensure their economic resiliency.

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