**Food Policy Forum – COVID-19 Actions**

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## **Overview**

**In light of COVID-19, the Food Policy Forum has been asked by the convening Directors to provide support to the food system in Washington in a new and specific way.**

**Food Policy Forum activity in light of COVID-19:**

* The Food Policy Forum is recognized as a group that represents a unique cross-section of food system stakeholders and sectors and therefore has an important perspective about how COVID-19 is and will continue to impact our food system. Many of the challenges Washington must address now in light of COVID-19 touch on the Forum’s 2019 consensus recommendations which highlight systemic vulnerabilities and opportunities that are particularly apparent under COVID-19. The Forum is well positioned to engage in food systems thinking and explore whether and how to make its early implementation actions relevant to COVID-19 response, economic relief, and food security in the broadest sense.
* There is short- and long-term value to pivoting the Forum’s current work towards COVID-19 response. With an extended network of public and private sector organizations across the food system, the Forum is well suited to support short-term efforts to keep the state’s food system functioning for all in light of COVID-19.

**The five Implementation Teams were asked to focus early April calls on:**

* + How the thinking to-date on early implementation actions can be refined in light of COVID-19 needs and responses; and
	+ Additional COVID-19-related early implementation actions the Forum should suggest.

## **Team 1: Food Insecurity**

1. Problem: School meal programs and community meal programs typically provide meals in the school or typical childcare environment. During COVID-19, there’s been a shift to more of a frontline model and congregate meals are no longer possible. The WA school meal program is currently serving about a 1/3 of the usual volume of meals daily. There are challenges to this pivot. Actions:
	* School meal program and Child Care nutrition programs are operating programs with federal guidelines that were not designed for the current environment/pivot. Even with new USDA waivers, operations on the ground are very challenging. Right now, staff are tweaking an existing program for a long-term large-scale pandemic scenario. Tweaking an existing program is time intensive and tricky. Long-term action: **USDA needs a new feeding program: feeding in an emergency/pandemic.**
	* Staffing this work has new challenges. Food service labor contracts and contracting has changed in terms of what people are being asked to do now versus what they signed up to do. Important source of staff has been moms with kids in school but now that staff have kids out of school and the job is less inviting. **If schools will be expected to continue feeding kids in an ongoing manner under COVID-19, schools and childcare programs need new or additional funding streams and a new staffing model.** *Question:*Can schools start coordinating with food banks and community organizations that sponsor or provide summer meals to open up their sites now? What about working with restaurant industry to prepare meals during summer months? Working with growers to source ingredients?
2. Problem: Hearing that supply and funding requests will be prioritized for healthcare system needs first. Actions: **Need a shared message about how food is an essential part of the public health response**. The recently created Washington Food Fund will still need money raised in the private sector for food distributors to use to buy food. Unified messaging on how food is part of the public health response would help prioritize anti-hunger action in the allocations of state and federal funds made available for the COVID-19 response in Washington. Public and private sector dollars together are needed to provide the much more costly food boxes that are needed for safer food distribution at food banks.
3. Problem: Growers have been impacted economically from ongoing trade disputes and now with COVID-19 are experiencing a major loss of markets. Concurrently there is an increased demand for local products for folks experiencing food insecurity. Actions: **Support growers and folks in need concurrently** **by exploring sourcing donated food, purchasing food from growers, and helping people use their benefits to buy fresh and local products,** for example:
	* **Fund purchases of locally grown food.** Food Lifeline, NW Harvest, and First Harvest are coordinating to provide food for food banks across the state. The three organization are refining a budget estimate of the funding needed to purchase food for immediate need through July until federal commodities come in.
	* **Pilot “Fresh Emergency Food Boxes”.** Support NWH to work with Washington growers who could supply a variety of locally grown fruit and vegetables to supplement the nonperishable food boxes NWH is building.
	* **Ensure public school have adequate funding and flexibility to purchase needed food products, and to purchase from local farms as needed**
	* **Allow the Secretary of Agriculture maximum flexibility to use Stafford Act Section 32 funds and Families First Coronavirus Act Section 101(g) to purchase foods from local food producers during Presidentially-declared emergencies and disasters**
	* **Relax or remove eligibility and matching fund requirements and expedite review and approval under the Gus Shumacher Nutrition Incentives Program.** Grant applications opened for GusNIP’s FY2020 cycle on March 13 and proposals are due May 18, with $41.5 million in awards available. DOH is applying for this grant as part of the state’s Fruit and Vegetable Incentives Program. Foundations and community benefit organizations that would be sources of match are focusing funds on COVID related items, making it difficult to fundraise.
	* **Allow for flexibility in WIC and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Programs (FMNP) and SNAP to continue to function as farmers markets change operation models (i.e. shift to pre-order and pick-up, delivery, CSA, food hub, or bulk purchase models in partnership with emergency food programs).** Disruption of these programs could be significant loss of revenue for farmers at markets that have robust participation.
	* **Allow state agencies to purchase eligible foods in bulk to ensure that farm products do not go to waste and are accessible to all who need food during this emergency.**
4. Problem: The COVID-19 context is rapidly evolving. Actions: **Increase coordination around food access benefits and gaps in the system by:**
	* **Making sure people are aware of the flexibilities being created by USDA and others to access benefits like SNAP, school meals, etc. and relief programs.** This would help take pressure of the food bank system. Ensure the state is taking advantage of available federal programs.
	* **Increase coordination around food access issues.** There are gaps in services and more is needed to identify the gaps and use available resources to respond to gaps. Build on existing efforts to coordinate food security response in light of COVID-19 to foster a localized coordinated community response system.
5. Problem: There is food in the system in WA or in the pipeline for use in WA that will go unused if not redirected. Actions: **Creatively and in a coordinated manner use available food in new ways and forms.** More (potentially “more communication?” or “Set up a communication forum to use available food in new ways and forms”? Or is there something out there, like an online food hub, that can be used?) action is needed. For example, OSPI has food from USDA in its pipeline sitting in warehouse that OSPI contract with, typically this food goes to schools. Schools were planning to serve a different type of meal than the bagged meals it is now serving under COVID-19 so the food in storage does not have immediate usage in the school meal environment. OSPI has the ability to release this food for other uses. Form is large quantities for example of chicken cutlets. Food could be moved to non-profit meal service providers and food banks who can use large quantities or break them down. **Explore applying for a disaster household food distribution plan to help move unused food items as needed.**
6. Problem: We’re operating in a radically changed environment. The FPF has unique insight into how systems change in a response context can leave behind lasting positive change for various food system stakeholders. Keep convening on these topics.

## **Team 2: Agricultural Land Protection and Availability and Next Generation Farming**

1. Problem*:* This time is extremely pivotal for agricultural land protection and farmer economic viability. If existing famers retire/get out of farming due to limited or changing markets, then significant agricultural land can be lost. Funding for farmland preservation could be pushed aside for needs that feel more urgent right now. However, this time presents the critical opportunity to provide direct funding to farmers. Most of the funds currently being offered to farmers is in the form of loans. Many farms are already extremely leveraged or are not interested in further leveraging themselves in a time of limited market certainty. Purchase of agricultural conservation easements provide funds directly to farms and simultaneously ensures long term food security for Washington State and supports ecosystem resilience that farmland and farmers supports. Furthermore, increasing the ability to couple farmland preservation with farmland access will ensure there is an opportunity for transfer of farmland to new and beginning farmers as this pandemic will certainly force some farms to close operations.
2. **Provide 100 million dollars in funds annually to Washington State Conservation Commission Agricultural Conservation Easement Account to provide immediate funds to purchase agricultural conservation easements**.  These funds will provide much needed support to agricultural producers across the state impacted by COVID-19 and protect agricultural land needed to provide long term food security for Washington State residents and communities.  Under this tool, a landowner voluntarily sells agricultural conservation easement to a qualified easement holder, eliminating most or all future residential development potential; the land is kept in agricultural production, the landowner receives compensation in a time of great need, and the land can be more accessible to a new farm buyer because the development rights have already been sold.
	* SCC has a framework in place for this, but it has not yet been funded. Josh Giuntoli had made sure the admin needed is in place for this program before switching rolls at the SCC.
	* This is an opportunity for Commission’s unfunded bucket to compensate for existing tools (WWRP) for emerging needs. An opportunity could be to tailor funding to play ball with federal money better. Identify opportunity areas that are not protected by existing funding. Could think of Commission’s buckets as targeting specific areas where people are struggling to maintain viability due to loss of direct market access. Could set up program to prioritize these types of projects.
3. **Invest in Farm PAI, which would be housed under the Washington State Housing Finance Commission**. This would involve solidifying the coalition and reinvesting in relationship building with the Commission to bring idea to the forefront.

## **Team 3: Alleviating Barriers to Small and Mid-Scale Producers Accessing Markets including Institutional Markets**

1. Problem: COVID-19 has created a huge shift in the market, there is increased interest in buying local and producers are interested in moving to a more direct-to-consumer business model.*Question: Who is sufficiently nimble to react to the opportunity created by a new focus on buying local?* Resource: WSU recently launched and is learning from a needs assessment tool to understand food system needs. Actions:
	1. **Support online selling platforms needs of producers to take advantage of the growing direct-to-consumer market opportunity (e.g., online food hubs, online farmers markets):**
		* Convene and support broad based launch of online marketplace to help farmers get product direct to WA customers. *Challenge:* Food Hubs are new businesses, seizing the opportunity offered by new, alternative, emerging markets is a risk when operating on small margins as a new business. Need to find success on first try.
		* Create position/capacity within WSDA/WSU/Other to coordinate multiple farm businesses moving to online platform so it’s not each producer having to solve the issue for themselves.
		* Create a focused subcommittee to identify what is needed from the producer and customer perspective for successful move to online platform. Determine important details of online farmers market like do customers buy by farm or by product type? An online farm listing requires each farm to have an online presence which can’t be assumed. Here is the Thurston CD website linking local farms to consumers. <https://www.thurstoncd.com/education/buyersguide/> *Challenge:* Will need to balance public coordination of knowledge sharing with allowing entrepreneurs to take tools & models that are quickly available, launch programs, learn and adapt. Many ‘what’s best’ questions are going to be constrained by ‘what is possible’ or ‘what products are currently available’ to facilitate an online marketplace, etc. Balance ‘committee-ing’ what would be ideal with diving in and learning what is possible and improve as we go.
	2. **Use funding and coordination to leverage existing local marketing programs (e.g., Eat Local First’s marketing for CSA and direct to consumer models) and related organizations and non-profits to bring marketing efforts statewide.** There are Eat Local First pilots in Whatcom and Skagi. Sustainable Connections, Tilth Alliance, Pierce County Fresh and Eat Local First Olympic Peninsula are partnering on submitting an LFPP grant to develop a statewide consumer facing Eat Local First web platform and Food Atlas to connect consumers to farms and local food. *Question:* *Who is being engaged in eastern Washington on this?* There’s an online Food Atlas, xxx is partnering with Tilth on this, focus is direct marketing farms primarily – consumer-oriented marketing. This is different from WA brand in a more retail supply chain context.
	3. **Continue to support and expand existing statewide directory of farms selling for local purchasing.** WSU’s Farm Finder tool is being updated now; site has several new administrators who can update the site in an ongoing manner. Farm Finder is expanding to include fishermen who are moving to brine and canned fish for direct to consumer sales. Tilth Alliances Farm Guide can be found here: <https://farm-guide.org/>. Conservation districts (CDs) can help with WA-grown messaging that isn’t necessarily one producer at a time to help consumers understand where their food comes from and how buying local is a way to support local community. Individual CDs are providing ways to connect local consumers with growers. Clark CD just launched a great page that will hopefully be continuously updated. https://clarkfarm2go.com/ Here is the Thurston CD page: <https://www.thurstoncd.com/education/buyersguide/> *Challenge:* Directories, compiling of info to which consumers can refer will only be so effective as it is paired with a robust promotional campaign messaging to consumers they should be looking for such options. Earned traditional media and robust social media coverage of the idea of ‘buy local through new alternate channels’ and where to look will be key.
2. Problem: COVID-19 has created a huge shift in the market, retailers still want WA products, but distribution system can’t handle the uptick in volume. Example: The pivot school meal providers are making from congregate meals to take-away means schools need produce in different forms, (this is true for food banks too), like the pivot to single servings of milk instead of bulk milk. There’s plenty of milk but some dairies/dairy cooperative have found it hard to transition quickly to this pivot in serving size. Another example: Yakima School District is having a hard time getting apples in a region rich with apples. Actions: **Realign the supply chain to meet changing demand needs by:**
	1. **Connecting institutional purchasers with suppliers.** We’re used to thinking about how to connect producers to institutional purchasers through easy/larger distribution networks, but that end customer is now thinking about how to bypass distributors to reach, for example, apple suppliers directly in Yakima. *Challenge:* From an enterprise perspective, in a situation of major revenue loss/disruption, businesses’ capacity to do this ‘alone’ is going to be limited — whether it is new logistical solutions or outright new customer relationships, the work required, while an opportunity, is in effect a market cultivation activity. Market cultivation is expensive and doesn’t generally pay off quickly — both challenges for enterprises to ‘lead’ in this context. *Question:* *Who can serve as an intermediary to connect institutional purchasers with suppliers?*
	2. **Sharing information on how to safely operate in the COVID-19 context and ensuring producers and processors have equipment to operate safely (especially in context of direct-to-consumer)**.DOH, WSDA, and WSU are working on public safety of the food system. Make relevant, timely public health and safety information, technical assistance, and funds available to farms, ranches, and food businesses so they can operate and transport essential food and agricultural products in accordance with CDC guidelines.
	3. **Helping existing TA providers to shift their operations,** likelocal conservation districts, WSU, SCC, etc. Support TA providers using state or federal dollars.
3. Problem: What’s available might be at a higher price point than institutional buyers can afford. Actions
4. **Relax school procurement practices and offer more money to schools to make purchases -- help get more packaged shelf stable WA product into schools.**
5. **Use federal and state dollars to help make WA-grown purchases.** For example, allow the TEFAP Farm to Food Bank funds (FTFB) to be used for purchase, transport and storage of commodities from local producers that would have otherwise been sold through direct marketing or institutional procurement that are not operating as a result of COVID-19 social distancing measures.
6. Problem: Food and farming businesses need financial support to weather the huge shift in the market that has wiped out reliable customers. Actions: Offer fiscal support to farmers and food and farming businesses by:
	1. **Allowing for flexibility in the USDA Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP) to more quickly and effectively provide support to regional food systems** **in line with that program’s purpose;** relax or remove eligibility and matching fund requirements and expedite review and approval under the Farmers Market Promotion Program, the Local Food Promotion Program, and the Value Added Producer Grant Program.
	2. **Supporting business support services.** KCD is looking to provide concierge services to farmers to support them.
	3. **Drawing down available COVID-19 relief for producer assistance.** 9.5 billion is available. Send state and FPF recommendations to USDA and work with OSPI to understand institutional buyer needs. Request direct purchase ability for food banks, schools, etc. to establish new price points.
	4. *Challenge:* It can be tricky to draw down relief, for example for small business support, the federal code makes it so small farms are not eligible and the new paycheck protection program may be hard to draw down.
	5. **Coordinating and sharing information regarding relief resources and services.** Itmay be confusing for farmers to track and take advantage of all the services and money being pushed out the door.

## **Team 4: Infrastructure and Rural Economic Development**

1. Problem: Most small businesses (any scale of farm in WA) are operating with limited cash flow – 90 days of cash in best case scenario.We know COVID-19 will last longer than 3 m and timeline of impact is not yet determined. There is uncertainty about where the bridge is going – what the new economy looks like. Support farms in a way that avoids farms going under due to debt. **Ensure economic stimulus responses explicitly addresses small, direct, and regionally marketing farms**, including Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms, food hubs and similar cooperative aggregation and distribution models, on-farm stores, etc. – not solely limited to farmers market farmers. Farm businesses need a financial bridge to weather the new pressures/change in markets created by COVID-19. Actions:
	1. **Explicitly include small, direct and regional marketing farms in small business, workforce, and emergency payments or loan programs.**
		* + SBA EIDLs now available throughout Washington should include these small farm-based businesses by nature of their integrated distribution, retail, and in some value-added food processing activities.
			+ USDA responses should include all types of crops and livestock production systems. Include beginning farmers who may not yet have records of previous sales income.
			+ **Provide direct financial assistance to critical supply chain businesses, food system workers, and food establishments.**
			+ Not all farm and food enterprises make sense to move to direct to consumer, like the grain to beer businesses (where there has been significant infra investment that still needs to be paid for while markets disappear). Support ag businesses that do not find there is an immediate replacement for their lost market.
	2. **Stabilize lines of credit, extend collateral positions, create a guarantee fund to allow lines of credit from banks or credit unions**.
	3. **Get information out in very short term about the Paycheck Protection Plan:** Info on PPP: <https://www.sba.gov/funding-programs/loans/paycheck-protection-program-ppp> which WA farm businesses are eligible for; application appears straight forward.
2. Problem: Massive shift in WA markets for WA-grown/raised product (e.g., All restaurant markets are gone, except for handful of large restaurants) and there is a move toward direct to consumer sales as population is sheltered in place. **Direct marketing farms and regional food businesses need support to pivot operations and infrastructure to serving customers who are sheltered in place and to operate in compliance with CDC social distancing guidelines.** Actions:
	1. We need to be producing food in our region to serve our region. **Increase the capacity of the WSDA Regional Markets Program.**
	2. **Determine infrastructure needs to support growing SNAP EBT local foods market opportunity.** With reduced incomes, there is an increase in number of folks eligible for SNAP and a signal of the loss of high-end retail sales. Margins being made on produce will change, will be more of a wholesale price if going through SNAP EBT aggregation point. Can Charlie’s Produce pre-bag $10 bags of produce for pick-up by SNAP EBT customers? Customers could swipe their EBT card at a designated spot prior to bag pick-up. *Research/info needs:* What infrastructure shifts are needed for farmers to sell to SNAP EBT customers
	3. **Explore using existing WA-based distribution networks (e.g. Amazon, Charlies Produce, etc.) to get WA-grown product direct to consumers.** *Research/info needs:* What infrastructure is needed for this shift (e.g., new and different processing)? Can Charlies deliver direct to consumer? Charlie’s is dealing with the same fallout from a changing market landscape. Linda in Snohomish County is exploring Sysco and Charlie’s Produce to get product to customers. For example, using Charlie’s trucks to serve a new market.
	4. **Consider deputizing WSDA food safety program to work with USDA to bring more slaughter and meat processors plants online** to mitigate local supply chain blockages and ensure small scale livestock producers are able to bring their products to local retail and direct to consumer markets. Determine if immediate need is more plants vs more capacity for existing plants/less risk if they were to make investments to step up to meet immediate demand.
	5. Distribution for direct to consumer is its own infrastructure and logistical hurdle, especially in light of new/emerging health and safety requirement/regs/desires due to COVID-19. Shift to direct to consumer necessitatescold and dry storage and drop points and more packaging which is required now because of health requirements. Food hubs need storage to do deliveries or value-added processing to put the food on the road. Need more labor in the middle now with pivot to delivery.
		* **Reorient/reallocate existing chilled transportation infrastructure to ensure adequate transportation capacity.** There is transportation capacity to make deliveries, there are cold trucks available and out of work. Leverage chilled transportation network work for food banks and schools. For example, NW Harvest is planning to hire a few LINC drivers/trucks for delivery to eastern WA food pantries.
		* **Ensure adequate storage and warehousing**. For example, grain producers are ramping up production of 5lb bags of flour from 50lbs bags of flour to meet new demand, but there not enough storage for shelf stable goods to accommodate new volume. Explore partnership with companies like Charlie’s Produce that have extra storage capacity. True for high-end and schools and food banks/pantries are dealing with. Food banks will now be extra challenged to accept and keep fresh produce.
		* **Ensure adequate processing facilities that can break down big commodities and WA-grown food to smaller shelf stable quantities.**
		* *Research/info needs:* **Determine where product is stuck and why to determine which businesses need what.** Learn from LINC Foods which recently shifted to remote drop site pick up once customer place online orders, Puget Sound Food Hub, and new food hub evolving through Thurston County ED. Desire someone to observe what’s working and what’s not and share that with folks interested in implementing online food hubs. Could built up capacity in WSU/WSDA tackle these research/info needs?
3. **Reactivate the supply chains of restaurants and institutions (schools, hospitals, etc.).**
	1. Support restaurants in preparing meals for institutional needs. Provide stimulus dollars to cover delta between keeping-lights-on costs for restaurants and purchase price. Center for Good Food Purchasing is developing this idea in LA.

## **Team 5: Impacts of Climate Change**

1. *Conversation in development*: Support conservation programs and resources, such as the Sustainable Farm and Fields program, that provide direct financial assistance to farmers to implement best management practices that address impacts of climate change and also provide employment opportunities and economic development.
	* *Example in development*: Provide funds and technical assistance for farmers to implement cover crops. This allows farmers to have funding (not tied to loans) that directly supports farm viability and production and addresses conservation and climate change goals.
2. Washington agencies and organizations should continue preparations for near-term and long-term planning and implementation of programs related to the climate change recommendations outlined by this Team in the June 2019 report to the Legislature. [*Might be helpful to outline the need to not put this work on hold here – thoughts?*]
	* Example: Continue to promote PDR programs; develop a comprehensive state-wide water availability strategy; Create and deploy a voluntary carbon credit program; Develop strategies to enhance adaptation for food and ag productions that are most likely to be impacted by climate change.

## **Implementation Team Rosters**

**Team 1: Food Insecurity**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Aaron | Czyzewski | Food Lifeline |
| Amy | Ellings | WA State Department of Health |
| Babette | Roberts | WA State Department of Social and Health Services |
| Christina | Wong | Northwest Harvest |
| Leanne | Eko | Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction |
| Trish | Twomey | WA Food Coalition |

**Team 2: Agricultural Land Protection and Availability and Next Generation Farming**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Addie | Candib | American Farmland Trust |
| Alison | Halpern | WSCC |
| Chris  | Elder | Whatcom County |
| Elizabeth | Bragg | WA State Young Farmers Coalition |
| Nick | Norton | Washington Association of Land Trusts |
| Ron | Shultz | WSCC |
| Tom | Salzer | WA Association of Conservation Districts |

**Team 3:** **Alleviating Barriers to Small and Mid-Scale Producers Accessing Markets including Institutional Markets**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Claire | Lane | WA State Anti-Hunger and Nutrition Coalition |
| Colleen | Donovan | WA State Farmers Market Association |
| Diane | Dempster | Clark County Food System Council |
| Jon | DeVaney | WA Tree Fruit Association |
| Laura | Lewis, Ph.D | WSU - Food Systems Program |
| Laura | Raymond | WSDA |
| Mary | Embleton | King Conservation District |

**Team 4: Infrastructure and Rural Economic Development**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Aslan | Meade | Thurston Economic Development Council |
| Brian | Estes | LINC Foods |
| Jamie | Wiggins | Food Northwest |
| Linda | Neunzig | Snohomish County |
| Mary | Dye | Representative |
| Melissa | Spear | Tilth Alliance |
| Nancy | Warner | Initiative for Rural Innovation and Stewardship |
| Patrick "PJ" | Cawley | Charlie’s Produce |
| Tim | Crosby | Cascadia Foodshed Financing Project |

**Team 5: Impacts of Climate Change**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Chad | Kruger | Washington State University - CSANR |
| Chris | Voigt | WA State Potato Commission |
| Chris | Elder | Whatcom County Public Works |
| Dan | Wood | WA State Dairy Federation |
| Diana | Carlen | WA Association of Wheat Growers |
| Richard | Conlin | Puget Sound Regional Council |
| Tom | Davis | WA State Farm Bureau |