

# Opportunity in a Time of Crisis

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING A MORE RESILIENT OHIO FOOD SYSTEM



Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association, Ohio Farmers Market Network, Ohio Food Policy Network, Produce Perks Midwest





# Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit early in 2020, it created an unprecedented crisis for Ohio and the nation. Ohio Governor Mike DeWine acted quickly to protect public health and mandated a temporary stay-at-home order. While necessary, this action has negatively impacted the state's economy and food system.

While economists, politicians, and corporations have for years extolled the virtues and efficiency of a centralized global food supply chain, the pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of this approach as grocery store shelves went bare, fields of food were plowed back into the soil, and families went hungry.[i]

Although COVID-19 paralyzed our country and broke many links in the national supply chain, our diverse local food system has persevered and helped meet the unprecedented demand from Ohio customers wanting safe and secure food.

To date, our local and regional food system has risen to the challenge with minimal assistance or support from the state or federal government. While this response has been remarkable, it is not sustainable, nor is it equitably serving all Ohioans. Our leaders have a unique opportunity to turn a short-term disaster response into a long-term platform for transformation that contributes to a resilient and economically strong and secure local and regional food system.

This document identifies missing links and opportunities in our local and regional food system and community food access, along with **eight policy recommendations** Ohio's decision-makers can implement in the short-term to invest in the long-term capacity of Ohio's farmers and farmers markets and build food security for vulnerable families.

Briefly, the eight policy recommendations which will be explored in this report are:

- Establishment of an interagency food work group to identify strategies to **fund and build farmers market capacity** including technical assistance and infrastructure development for online purchasing platforms for farmers markets, direct-to-consumer producers, and local retailers;
- Establishment of an interagency food work group to identify areas where **creation of food preservation, processing, and distribution facilities** are needed and how they can be financed;
- Passage of the **HEROES Act** with aid for underserved farmers and those selling into local food systems;
- Passage of the **Family Farm ReGeneration Act (HB 183/SB 159)**;
- Changes to **state contract bidding requirements for local food purchasing**;
- **Online infrastructure development for SNAP nutrition incentive programming**, like Produce Perks;
- Support of the **SNAP Online Expansion and Delivery Act**; and
- Passage of **Senate Bill 121**, which supports nutrition education.





# Local and Regional Food Systems

## LAY OF THE LAND

Ohio's local food system consists of a diverse array of businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies including farms, value-added producers, farmers markets, food hubs, produce auctions, processors, distributors, retailers, and community organizations. Vegetables, fruits, meat, eggs, dairy products, grains, and value-added products are commonly produced for local and regional markets.

Local and regional farmers (LRF) primarily utilize direct-to-consumer outlets like farmers markets, farm stands, and community supported agriculture (CSA) programs. Many also sell to restaurants and small grocers or co-ops. Some produce growers have scaled up to form cooperatives that serve wholesale buyers like larger grocers and institutions.

While there is, unfortunately, a widespread lack of economic data collected on local food systems, the evidence we do have strongly suggests they were experiencing robust growth prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, Ohio producers' direct-to-consumer sales increased from \$46 million in 2012 to \$80 million in 2017, while sales of local food through retailers and restaurants totaled more than \$118 million. These burgeoning LRFs are more likely to stay in business than those not marketing through direct-market channels because they are able to retain a higher percentage of the food dollar. [ii] Additionally, farmers that sell their products locally create a multiplier effect for the local economy, creating 15 full-time jobs for each \$1 million in revenue earned compared to only three jobs for food that leaves the region.[iii]

Many of these LRFs rely on farmers markets. There are more than 8,600 registered farmers markets across the U.S. and an estimated 400 farmers markets in Ohio, according to the Ohio Farmers Market Network. Ohio farmers markets generate approximately \$11,000 per market day[iv]. More than 20 percent of farmers markets also helped incubate new agriculture-related businesses by sharing facilities, retail space, and/or providing technical assistance.[v]

Farmers markets also provide important access points to local food. Nearly three-quarters of farmers markets have at least one vendor accepting federal nutrition assistance as payment, including programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Women, Infants and Children Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (WIC FMNP), and the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP).

## IMPACTS AND RESPONSES TO COVID-19

Nationally, farmers relying on commodity supply chains were affected by the market disruptions resulting from the pandemic. Outbreaks of the disease closed meat processing plants resulting in farmers having to euthanize millions of animals. Restaurant closures led many dairy producers to dump their milk. The suspension of temporary visas interrupted the availability of migrant labor who help plant, grow, and harvest produce. Closed restaurants, schools, and colleges also meant cancelled contracts for farmers and food distributors.

As COVID-19 exposed the vulnerabilities of a consolidated, global food supply chain, LRFs continued to farm and many of the market outlets they rely on adapted, despite a decades-long disinvestment in community level assets, like processing facilities.

In many instances, online sales, CSA programs, and low contact home delivery and pick up locations have exploded as farmers pivoted quickly to make the adjustments needed to feed our communities. As commodity producers euthanized hogs and poultry and dumped milk, many small meat and organic dairy producers are reporting record sales. School and restaurant closures affected farmers and food hubs, but school district-run lunch programs for needy children and direct-to-consumer retail sales helped mitigate some of those losses. Despite strong demand, some LRFs have lost markets and many have incurred increased marketing and labor costs. Most have received no government support for their losses or additional costs, as federal programs, like the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), have been tailored to large-scale commodity growers.

Many farmers markets adopted drive-thru models or instituted strict social distancing procedures in a matter of weeks, thanks to the herculean efforts of market managers and volunteers. These adaptations required considerable time, energy, and cost to accomplish.

Additional costs to markets include personal protective equipment, sanitizer and sanitizing stations, staff, social distance guidance for vendors and customers, rent for new locations, and online sales platform fees and management. At the same time, markets have lost income from vendor fees (social distancing has required many markets to reduce their number of vendors, and some farmers have

opted out of markets to reduce the risk for themselves and their employees), sponsorships, events, and educational or entertainment activities, which are now prohibited. Markets will continue to face



“Without a doubt, 2020 is a different type of year,” said Elizabeth Stites of Hyde Park Farmers Market in Hamilton County. “We have had to reinvent our market almost weekly, going from a prepaid, drive-thru market in March to a walk-in COVID-19 farmers’ market today. None of these structures existed 12 months ago, and I am not yet convinced these are viable models for farmers markets into the future. The amount of strain that our COVID-19 world has brought on the market management team and the farmers themselves is unimaginable.”

challenges, including the strain on all these systems when the volume of product is highest at peak season, volunteer and manager burnout, and the potential for a second and third wave of the pandemic.



“I’m lucky to be part of a market that did a vast amount of legwork to create a drive-thru market in a matter of weeks,” said farmer Joan Richmond of Meadow Rise Farm in Richland County. “But growing for an online platform is stressful. I have to enter inventory every Monday, meaning I need to know how much I’ll have at harvest for market five days in advance, and the labor required to pack and organize the orders is significant. On top of all that, I fully expect a second wave of COVID-19. When that hits, I think people will be more likely to avoid going out than ever. It’s working for now, but I don’t know what it will look like in six weeks. I’m worried about making enough money to pay my workers.”

Moreover, necessary market modifications and reduced market attendance have cut sales at many farmers markets. Some market managers have reported they are seeing only 25 percent of the sales they'd expect to see in a normal year, according to the Ohio Farmers Market Network.

Despite these obstacles, LRFs and markets have demonstrated incredible resilience and creativity in responding to this crisis; however, many of these sacrifices are not sustainable.

We have an opportunity to build on this local leadership and ingenuity. Ohio's decision-makers need to invest in regional food systems infrastructure for aggregation, processing, and distribution to ensure a stronger food system that's capable of serving our communities long term.

## ADDRESSING OHIO'S MISSING LINKS

While the pandemic has dramatically exposed the systemic weaknesses in our food system, most of the problems facing LRFs and farmers markets are nothing new. In this moment, it is important to look beyond short-term solutions to the current crisis, and instead address the underlying problems facing Ohio agriculture, including lack of funding for farmers markets, land access challenges, and limited processing infrastructure.

First, Ohio needs to invest in the resilience of farmers markets that have proven incredibly adaptable and important during this crisis. As noted previously, that adaptation did not come without cost. Most markets operate on a shoe-string budget and additional costs could threaten their continuation. Online sales technology will be necessary for the long-term and will require considerable time and capital to operate, and it's unclear whether these systems and market staff are capable of handling increased peak season volume. The current crisis has revealed the important service local farmers markets provide to farmers and consumers, but investment is needed to ensure they don't disappear from our communities, cutting off an important source of local food and laboratories for food business development.

**Recommendation 1: We call on Governor Mike DeWine to establish an interagency food work group to identify strategies to fund and build farmers market capacity to improve public health and food system resilience including steps to ensure online infrastructure development for online purchasing platforms and/or technical assistance for farmers markets, direct-to-consumer producers, and local retailers is available to equitably serve all consumers, including those using SNAP, WIC, and SFMNP. This group should also consider how administration of these programs can be streamlined to ensure consistency for customers, farmers, and markets.**

Second, Ohio needs to address the ongoing lack of processing facilities in the state, which hampers LRF business growth. The most notable weakness in Ohio's regional processing infrastructure is meat processing. Meat processors serving direct marketing producers have been at capacity for years and many livestock producers interested in higher value organic markets cannot make that transition as there is only one certified organic processing plant in the state with extremely limited capacity. Many farmers must drive their animals long distances to the nearest processor, and the lack of processors makes it difficult for farmers to start or expand their businesses.

Supporting the development of meat processing facilities strategically located in Ohio's diverse regions would provide better access and lower costs for farmers, allow more small to mid-size growers to scale up, enhance affordable consumer access to local meat, and protect against current and future market disruptions.

Lack of investment in processing facilities that would allow farmers to cost-effectively can, freeze, pickle, and dry their products is another limitation. Creating farmer-run and not-for-profit infrastructure would allow farmers to minimally process and store product for markets in the fall, winter, and spring when they could be marketed to schools, institutions, and retail outlets. The Ohio Food Policy Advisory Council [vi] identified the need to invest in food processing



**“I had one buyer increase our contract for my chicken because COVID created such a surge in demand, which is great. But I only have two options for getting my birds processed,” said Henry Jochem of Primaterra Farm in Perry County. “Pleasant Valley in Tuscarawas County is an hour and forty-five minutes away, and King and Sons is three hours. It’s a huge cost in time and fuel. And, while I was able to schedule enough appointments to cover my usual production, they are so busy that it’s hard to get additional appointments now so I can grow.”**

infrastructure in 2009, and more than a decade later, the Ohio Solutions from the Land Initiative [vii] reiterated that need. Food processing infrastructure not only bolsters the resilience of the Ohio food system but also creates jobs and builds wealth in local communities.

- **Recommendation 2: Governor Mike DeWine can use an interagency food work group to identify areas where creation of food preservation, processing, and distribution facilities are needed and how they can be financed.**

Third, LRFs, beginning farmers, organic farmers, and socially disadvantaged farmers who have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 and who have been overlooked by previous disaster relief, should receive support in the fourth aid package. With the risk of a second or even third wave of infections, and the pending expiration of Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, targeting assistance to LRFs is necessary to protect them should consumer spending decline mid-season as this crisis evolves. The U.S. House of Representatives has passed the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act which, if signed into law, would provide millions in support to farmers not supported in the prior aid packages.

- **Recommendation 3: We call on Ohio Senators Sherrod Brown and Rob Portman to support provisions in the HEROES Act which aid underserved LRFs and work to strengthen the bill by targeting and prioritizing resources to small farmers and those selling into local food systems.**

Fourth, access to land is a perennial problem for beginning farmers as well as those looking to add acreage, as they are often outbid by

large commodity farms and developers. When they can access land, LRFs often cannot afford the equipment, labor, and/or infrastructure they need and struggle to access capital that could help address these needs. Ohio's food security depends upon farmland staying in production and new farmers getting on the land. Ohio needs to incentivize land transfer between landowners and beginning farmers to protect farmland for future food production and support the next generation of farmers doing the necessary work of feeding our families.

- **Recommendation 4: We ask the Ohio Legislature to expeditiously pass the Family Farm ReGeneration Act (HB 183/SB 159), a bi-partisan bill which would provide tax credits to landowners and beginning farmers.**

Fifth, Ohio can reward contractors who purchase from Ohio farmers and businesses. The 2017 Census data reveals that state and local governments collectively spent about \$3.7 trillion through contracting, which can go to out-of-state or foreign companies. Taking a more thoughtful approach to this spending and redirecting these contracts to Ohio businesses would generate an enormous multiplier effect, increasing income, wealth, and jobs in the state. Locally-owned businesses spend two to four times more of every contract dollar on local vendors than do non-local businesses, thereby increasing area employment and income more than non-local food businesses.[viii] Directing state and local governments to require bidders to

indicate a minimum percentage they plan to re-spend in the state—in this case on local food purchasing—would increase the benefit to Ohio farmers, comply with World Trade Organization rules, and allow all companies to compete on level playing field by taking into account their tax generation.[ix]

- **Recommendation 5: We call on Governor Mike DeWine to use his authority to require state contract bids for food purchasing to indicate the minimum percentage they plan to re-spend in the state.**

Ohio can take full advantage of the opportunities in our local food system with clear policy directives and investment in the infrastructure necessary to support a well-functioning regional food system.



# Food Access and Health Outcomes

## LAY OF THE LAND

Approximately 1.5 million Ohioans struggle to afford food and the state has the seventh highest number of households receiving food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Furthermore, 16.2 percent of Ohio households and 19.5 percent of those with children struggle to afford enough food, a figure that is exponentially increasing with the advance of the pandemic.

To help address the tremendous need for healthy food access, Produce Perks (PP), Ohio's nutrition incentive program, provides a \$1-for-\$1 match for SNAP beneficiaries (including Pandemic-Electronic Benefit Transfer, or P-EBT) to buy fruits and vegetables from Ohio farmers markets, direct-to-consumer producers, and local retailers. PP increases affordable access to healthy foods for all Ohio households receiving SNAP benefits and is operational at 125+ locations statewide. In 2019, PP generated more than \$900,000 in healthy food purchases from more than 500 farmers.



**"The tokens received on account of Produce Perks have often been the only way I have been able to afford fresh vegetables," said Joseph, a SNAP user in Cincinnati. "Produce Perks tokens allow parents and children alike to eat higher quality food where they may not be able to otherwise, while also supporting our local economy via exercising the choice to obtain food from our good farmers, who we all too often forget are the true back bone of our great state."**

The Health Policy Institute of Ohio recommends nutrition incentive programming, like Produce Perks, as the top-rated, evidence-based state policy strategy to address food insecurity and improve health outcomes. This nationally recognized model is supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and recommended by the Ohio Department of Health as a key strategy within the State Health Improvement Plan and is recognized for its dual impact of increasing purchases of fruits and vegetables by SNAP consumers and increasing revenues for small- to mid-sized farmers, farmers markets, and grocery retailers.[x] Additionally, it boosts local economies. The USDA estimates that every \$1 in SNAP spending creates \$1.80 in economic activity, which is magnified when purchasing locally grown food.

## IMPACTS AND RESPONSES TO COVID-19

In the past few months, more than 1.2 million Ohioans have filed initial jobless claims, exceeding the combined total for the past three years. An additional 161,000 residents not eligible for regular unemployment have filed for emergency Pandemic Unemployment Assistance.[xi] According to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, 16.8 percent of Ohioans were unemployed in April, giving the state the sixth highest unemployment rate in the nation.



**"Due to the COVID-19 crisis and high unemployment, we are seeing new SNAP customers every week. With the unlimited Produce Perks it is not uncommon to have customers purchasing \$100 or \$200 in tokens. Last Saturday we processed around \$1,700 in SNAP tokens versus \$250 last year," said Dan Madigan, manager of the Toledo Farmers Market. "One customer told me she lost her job last month and that it was great that we offered the Produce Perks, so she could eat healthy and stretch her food dollars. Another customer shared with me that she uses the Produce Perks tokens and lets each of her kids use them for things that they want. This is fantastic as this is creating some great positive memories for these children and hopefully they become our future customers."**

This record unemployment and under-employment, along with the closure of schools which disrupted free and reduced breakfast and lunch programs has increased the demand for food assistance. Thankfully, Ohio has stepped up to meet some of this challenge by making resources available through P-EBT to provide meals for children who are currently unable to receive them at school. More than 92,000 Ohioans applied for SNAP benefits between mid-March and mid-April this year, with some weeks seeing 172 percent growth compared to 2019.[xii] With expanded unemployment assistance scheduled to end on July 31, many Ohioans will be left with limited resources for purchasing food, potentially driving more people to the emergency food system.

## ADDRESSING OHIO'S MISSING LINKS

Local food systems have the potential to address many of the needs and health outcomes of food insecure Ohioans while at the same time generating real economic benefit to farmers and local communities.

First, we need to address the barriers to farmers, farmers markets, and local retailers participating in online SNAP sales. Ohio recently received a waiver to participate in the USDA online SNAP purchasing pilot. Albeit a step in the right direction, it is difficult and costly for local outlets to develop the online platforms and infrastructure required to serve

SNAP consumers online. Instead, the predominant food outlets for this purchasing are Amazon and Walmart. As we move to online SNAP sales we must ensure that those purchases can be made from farmers and the small retailers that contribute jobs and economic viability to local communities.

- **Recommendation 6: We ask Governor Mike DeWine to ensure online infrastructure development for SNAP nutrition incentive programming, like Produce Perks, is available to support healthy food purchases for low-income consumers.**
- **Recommendation 7: We call on the Ohio Congressional delegation to support the SNAP Online Expansion and Delivery Act, which would contribute to increased healthy food access and farm viability by allowing farmers and small retailers to accept online SNAP orders and providing resources so they are equipped to do so.**

Second, nutrition education can be used to improve the health outcomes of Ohioans, while growing demand for local, fresh food, building understanding of our local and regional food system, and increasing awareness of SNAP and access to online purchasing. Ohio ranks 47th in the nation for the disparity between the health of low-income residents compared to that of high-income residents, with a gap of nearly 30 years across Ohio between the shortest and longest lifespans.[xiii] More than 33 percent of children in Ohio have enough excess weight to

put them at risk of developing early onset diet-related conditions like diabetes and heart disease. It also has been shown that people with underlying health problems are at higher risk of experiencing severe COVID-19 symptoms.[ixx]

One important way to address diet-related disease, counteract the trajectory of the current generation having a shorter lifespan than their parents, and give people the skills they need to eat healthy and be part of Ohio's local food system is for the Ohio Department of Education to adopt health standards. These standards would provide a framework for teachers, administrators, and parents to design health and nutrition education curriculum that fits the needs of their students and communities.

- **Recommendation 8: The Ohio Legislature should move expeditiously to pass Senate Bill 121, requiring the State Board of Education to adopt health education standards, as is the case with other academic content areas.**

Our recommendations are in direct alignment with, and enhance, existing measures and provisions related to previous coronavirus relief packages and Ohio's participation in the USDA's online SNAP purchasing pilot; and provide long-term solutions, assets, and more effective, equitable public safety nets within Ohio.





# Summary of Recommendations

The current health and economic crisis has demonstrated the importance of our local and regional food system to Ohioans, but we must stop taking it for granted. It's time to invest in strategies that will, over the long-term, build a more resilient local and regional food system that provides increased market opportunity for farmers, creates more jobs, increases healthy food access, and is better able to respond to future market disruptions. While these investments are not intended to replace the entire current food system, bolstering Ohio's food system and strengthening LRFs will offer myriad benefits.

The following actions are necessary to develop a more resilient local and regional food system:

- We call on Governor Mike DeWine to establish an interagency food work group to:
  - Identify strategies to **fund and build farmers market capacity** to improve public health and food system resilience including steps to **ensure online infrastructure development** for online purchasing platforms and/or technical assistance for farmers markets, direct-to-consumer producers, and local retailers is available to equitably serve all consumers, including those using SNAP, WIC, and SFMNP. This group should also consider how administration of these programs can be streamlined to ensure consistency for customers, farmers, and markets.
  - Identify areas where **creation of food preservation, processing, and distribution facilities** are needed and how they can be financed.
- We call on Ohio Senators Sherrod Brown and Rob Portman to **support provisions in the HEROES Act which aid underserved LRFs** and work to strengthen the bill by targeting and prioritizing resources to small farmers and those selling into local food systems.

- We ask the Ohio Legislature to expeditiously **pass the Family Farm ReGeneration Act (HB 183/SB 159)**, a bi-partisan bill which would provide tax credits to landowners and beginning farmers.
- We call on Governor Mike DeWine to use his authority to **require state contract bids for food purchasing** to indicate the minimum percentage they plan to re-spend in the state.



The following actions are necessary to ensure food access and health outcomes:

- We ask Governor Mike DeWine to **ensure online infrastructure development for SNAP nutrition incentive programming**, like Produce Perks, is available to support healthy food purchases for low-income consumers.
- We call on the Ohio Congressional delegation to **support the SNAP Online Expansion and Delivery Act**, which would contribute to increased healthy food access and farm viability by allowing farmers and small retailers to accept online SNAP orders and providing resources so that they are equipped to do so.
- The Ohio Legislature should move expeditiously to **pass Senate Bill 121**, requiring the State Board of Education to adopt health education standards, as is the case with other academic content areas.



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## PHOTO CREDITS

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## SOURCES

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