

OEFFA COVID-19 Policy Recommendations



The Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA) cultivates a future in which sustainable and organic farmers thrive, local food nourishes our communities, and agricultural practices protect and enhance our environment. We are also a USDA accredited organic certification agency, certifying more than 1,300 operations. We have more than 4,200 members who farm and support local and regional food systems.

The farmers we serve, and members of the community they serve, depend on what are often considered “alternate market channels.” These direct to consumer, farm to institution, farm stand, food hub, and other outlets stand to be greatly impacted by COVID-19 and yet, during times of crisis such as these, alternate market channels are more important than ever.

These alternative market channels (farmers’ markets, farm to school, food hubs serving other institutions and restaurants are projected to experience more than \$688 million decline in sales leading to a payroll decline of up to \$103.3 million, and a ***total loss to the economy of more than \$1.3 billion from March to May of 2020 alone.***¹

Please implement the policy recommendations below, so that farmers may continue to produce healthful food for their communities and that food is available to as a wide a net of Ohioans as possible.

1. **Urge the Ohio Development Services to include farmers’ markets, food hubs, and produce auctions in aid packages for small businesses negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis** as illustrated by the forecast presented above.
2. **Provide Ohio Department of Agriculture guidance to direct market agricultural food outlets, critical in this time of need, and ensure resources for sanitizing equipment and hand-washing stations are available for these venues.** Despite being classified as Essential Businesses by Ohio, many farmers’ markets may remain closed if shortages prevent them from accessing the sanitizing equipment and hygiene tools needed to operate responsibly. Helping them acquire the supplies they need will keep more markets open and help prevent worst case scenario economic loss of up to \$1.32 billion.
3. **Provide incentives and assistance for on-line ordering platforms and curbside pick-up at farmers’ markets to reduce handling at markets and promote social distancing.** Only 8% of local food farms had an online marketplace in 2015, But the farms that did had higher local food sales and value-added sales. This suggests there is significant opportunity for growth in online local food sales. Helping producers incorporate online sales may help mitigate the estimated \$688.7 million decline in sales due to social distancing. Furthermore, investing in online sales now may help small farms grow their business after this crisis passes.
4. **Provide emergency disaster payments for small to mid-size, beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers selling fresh and minimally processed foods and farm products to schools and direct market venues who have or will experience lost or significantly reduced markets due to social distancing.** Even the most optimistic estimate of lost farmers’ market sales totals \$240 million. The lost revenue may force may lead to the loss of farm businesses needed in the future.
5. **Develop buy-up programs for produce, meat and poultry items that have lost market venues and distribute to the emergency food system.** These programs are needed to help mitigate a potential \$1.32 billion loss to the economy by helping farmers remain solvent and sending much

needed food into the emergency food system to support Ohioans from other hard-hit sectors who have seen wages disappear, in some cases overnight.

6. **Support local and regional food system capacity by directing USDA to use existing cooperative agreement authority to operationalize current and previous Farmers' Market Promotion Program and Local Food Promotion Program grantees and begin building out and funding alternative models of local food distribution.** Markets and local food nonprofits are already adjusting their operations to better serve their stakeholders in a time of crisis. Providing added flexibility for the use of already allocated dollars is an immediate and low-cost way of helping the local food sector manage the crisis and supporting the development of critical infrastructure needed now and into the future.
7. **Ensure foreign and domestic agricultural workers are fully available to prevent farm labor shortages that would further disrupt food availability by expediting border entry of previously interviewed H 2-A workers returning to their previous host farms and streamline the vetting process for new workers.** The inability to harvest, process or transport food during this time would have devastating economic and social consequences.
8. **Ensure that food and farmworkers are included in emergency response packages to offset lost income.**

Please contact OEFFA's Policy Program Director, Amalie Lipstreu with questions or feedback at (440) 897-5794 or amalie@oeffa.org.

¹ Economic impact assessment compiled by: Dawn Thilmany, Becca Joablonski, Debra Tropp, Blake Angelo and Sarah Low.