
MEMORANDUM

TO: LAURA RAYMOND AND MADISON MOORE
FROM: ANNA FOGEL, YONA SIPOS, AND SARAH COLLIER
SUBJECT: IDENTIFYING WIDESPREAD COVID-19 IMPACTS AND SHIFTS IN THE FARMING SECTOR: KEY TRENDS AND TAKEAWAYS FROM AUTUMN 2020 DISCUSSIONS WITH AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SYSTEM PROFESSIONALS IN WASHINGTON STATE
DATE: FEBRUARY 24TH, 2021

Background

In order to gain a better understanding of what issues have most impacted Washington state farmers and to inform development of the subsequent WA Farm COVID-19 Survey, interviews were conducted with agricultural and food system stakeholders between September 21st and October 8th, 2020. A total of 17 interviews were conducted with professionals representing private businesses (8), non-governmental organizations (6), and commodity commissions (3). Interviews focused on observed trends within the industry, sector, or demographic that each interviewee represents or interacts with regularly, with emphasis on the ability or inability for Washington producers to effectively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary line of questioning revolved around three resilience capacities: robustness, adaptability, and transformability¹. Supplementary questioning included a focus on decision making factors. All interviews were conducted by researchers from UW, WSU, and/or WSDA.

Key Trends and Takeaways

The following themes were independently identified by at least five interviewees each:

1. Shifting market channels from wholesale to direct-to-consumer (DCT) sales brought a heightened focus on regional distribution and required significant pivots in business practices and production models.
2. Business pivots into online and DCT markets resulted in the development of a “new middleman” in which networking and consolidation reduced the need for traditional third-party distributors.
3. Increased networking and community involvement led to enhanced communication and collaboration between multiple sectors of the food system, supporting local food production and distribution and helping to sustain farm functionality.
4. Government support is vital for farms of all scales to adjust to a changing and unpredictable market. Enhanced accessibility and assistance for farms of all scales in applying for funding is needed.
5. Enhanced consumer education and knowledge is important for sustaining the trend of increased local and regional purchasing (e.g. building familiarity with products that may be less familiar to home cooks).
6. Labor-related challenges and uncertainties due to COVID-19 have increased interest in automation and other technological upgrades in order to reduce reliance on human labor.
7. Lack of infrastructure is one of the primary barriers inhibiting many producers from adapting and/or expanding practices (e.g. limited storage or distribution capacity).
8. Uncertainty about the next growing season is a leading concern for producers.

Suggested Citation

Fogel, A., Sipos, Y., and Collier, S. Memorandum to: Laura Raymond and Madison Moore. 2021 Feb. 24. Identifying widespread COVID-19 impacts and shifts in the farming sector: Key trends and takeaways from autumn 2020 discussions with agriculture and food system professionals in Washington State.
<https://nutr.uw.edu/cphn/wafarm/memo1>

¹ Meuwissen M.P.M., Feindt P.H., Spiegel A., *et al.* (2019) A framework to assess the resilience of farming systems. *Agric Syst* 176:102656. doi:10.1016/j.agsy.2019.102656