

# Food and Farm Systems

## COVID19 Impacts

### Capital Region District

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#### **Briefing Note March 23, 2020**

Over the past week organizations and individuals who are working across the food sector including community and health agencies have been meeting online to gather information about what they are seeing happen in terms of food and food systems in our communities. CRFAIR has been requested by a number of government agencies and institutions, local decision makers to understand what is “happening on the ground” in terms of the impacts of COVID19 and the measures being taken to control the spread. Please be aware that this information is being gathered quickly and comes from multiple sources. We are doing our best to ensure it is sound information and the situation is also changing quickly.

Following you will see two sections, one focused on **Food Access**, and a second on **farming and the food supply chain, including both formal commercial economy and informal community food sharing economy**.

### **Weekly Roundup on Food Access**

Members of the FoodShare Steering Committee met on March 19, 2020. Below are the key issues identified and current actions being explored and “in action”. Meetings will continue every Thursday.

#### **Situation Unfolding:**

Agencies are working to provide food within safe protocols:

- Agencies are working to put in place COVID19 protocols and continue food services and related social programming.
- Agencies are working to put in place the social distancing and sanitization protocols but ability to support individuals with their own sanitization needs when receiving food has been difficult in some locations.
- Agencies don't have enough hand sanitizer to provide to individuals accessing food services (or no hand washing facilities available).
  - Noted there is a possible connection with a distillery making hand sanitizer that can be tapped into (see Action Items below).
- Most are seeing and anticipate a steady increase to need for food services. This may be particularly prevalent in social housing if there is sustained confinement.
- Most have moved from food pantry and markets to handing out hampers and food bags.

### **Volunteers:**

- Organizations reliant on volunteers are finding a drop in volunteers, especially as many are elderly.

### **Availability of Food:**

- There is also a decrease in food from both the rescued food stream as well as challenges to receiving donated food and it needing to be in quarantine for 24 hours with no storage area or system to do so.
- The Food Security Warehouse is also seeing a decrease in food from the stores as there has been less coming in from the grocery stores.
- Also bulk buying by consumers has decreased food access from suppliers.
- The food from the Mustard Seed coordinated food rescue initiative at Viewfield is vital and they are also experiencing challenges with staffing and volunteers and have needed to go to restricted hours this week.
- There is consideration of a regional “Grow” campaign to have more fresh foods available from local gardeners, volunteers and farmers this growing season (more notes on this below).

### **Funding:**

- Agencies are also seeing multiple challenges with funding, for example St. Vincent De Paul must carry the ongoing cost of their stores but have to close them,
- Normally major donations come from parishes and mass collections which are not happening. Increased demands will quickly stretch budgets.
- UPDATE: The Victoria Foundation, Jawl Family and Times Colonist have set up a fund that will support these efforts <https://victoriafoundation.bc.ca/rapid-relief-fund/>

### **Summary of Key issues at present**

- lack of hand sanitizers and washing stations-especially downtown
- lack of space to quarantine donated food
- volunteer drop off, most are elderly
- potentially staff shortages
- Food Rescue initiative is decreasing food and services (at least temporarily)
- decrease in bulk food availability due to consumer buying
- need for cash donations
- need to reach out to the FoodShare Network to get a better idea of needs and ways to support each other
- concerns of school children not accessing food with school closures
- Need to look at medium to long term impacts on indigenous communities, First Nations Health Authority and Health Directors are identifying food security as an issue and challenge indigenous communities are experiencing and are accessing emergency funds and gift cards to circulate on reserve and how to support planning

## Key Actions we are working on and needing attention and support

- People need more information on best practice protocols for all areas
- Need to look at medium to long term impacts on indigenous communities. Currently food and resources to communities through Good Food to You and Good Food Boxes. Some restaurants/suppliers are supplying food as they close down and reaching out to the nations, who are distributing this to priority folks in their communities (Tsarlip Health Center). First Nations Health Authority is working to send out community surveys to better understand what is happening in communities and the care they need as well as distributing information on COVID19.
- work to access hand sanitizers through distilleries
- look to determine facilities to quarantine donated food
- coordinated reach out to volunteers
- critical that Viewfield Food Security and Distribution Warehouse has the resources it needs to be a hub for food donation and distribution
- Joint Press release to go out Week of March 20 encouraging people to provide cash and gift card donations, not food at this time
- Follow up with the Province to find out what supports will be in place to support sector efforts to address what is predicted to be a significant rise in need for food supports as economic impacts are felt in the community

## Weekly Round up on Farming and the Food Supply Chain

This information is gathered both from a weekly briefing meeting of the Good Food Network Leaders as well as additional research with the farm community and other businesses and agencies.

### Situation Unfolding

Larger Farmers are concerned about the Border Closures and **Temporary Foreign Workers** and the Seasonal Agriculture Workers Program. The Federal Government put in place exceptions to closing borders to TFW, and have strict quarantine protocols in place. We depend on 50-60,000 workers in Canada and many of the larger farms were expecting their workers in the next few weeks. It is still unknown if workers will want or be able to travel. This specialized skilled labour is difficult to replace.

We have heard that Minister Popham is actively working on this and also looking at options for employment training programs that could help to shift current workforce towards farm labour, however there are concerns from the farm community that as the economy recovers, workers who have been brought on to the farms would return to their jobs in the peak of the season. Implications are that some of the larger farmers are considering what to plant and workforce

Conversation with a farmer from the Vegetable Growers Coop points to **potential increased demand from wholesalers** as they are hedging their bets against disruption to other produce supply (US in particular). They are receiving calls from suppliers they have not worked with in the past and are being asked to “plant everything they can”.

There are calls to consider **Farmers Markets** an essential service. We are hearing that there is active work to keep the markets open. In some cases markets are on land (I.e. Moss Street Market) that is

owned by the School District or other entities who are not allowing markets to go ahead, so are looking to relocate (Moss Street is moving to the Boulevard). City of Victoria also temporarily revoked licenses for markets but has now pivoted to create special licenses to go ahead. As markets are a key sales point for farmers shutting down markets would require significant shifts in marketing. Markets are looking for direction and protocols to remain open. Markets are also a key area for community food access so are critical to fresh food supply over the next six months.

There are other options being explored to support **farm produce distribution** in particular the role that the Food Security and Distribution hub can play. As restaurants are shuttered and markets may be a challenge, what are the other options for growers to market?. Does a distribution platform and facility that is currently in the business plan of the hub need to be accelerated. Does the warehouse storage and cold storage and processing capacity have important roles to play. There is a farmer zoom meeting to discuss this March 31.

Some farms are shifting supply from restaurants into their box programs and farm gate sales. This is taking considerable time from the farmers at this busy time of year and they have to manage crowds of customers at their farm gate to ensure social distancing and good COVID19 protocols. Some farms who don't sell through farm gates are cooperating with other farms to sell at farms where there are accessible farm stands. Madrona Farm has set up a drive through farm stand. Some farms are running out of winter stored crops, spring crops are around the corner.

**Supply Chain**, Emergency Management BC is putting in place advance planning on Supply Chain management in times of emergency. We have tried to contact them but have not gotten a response. There are strong measures and reassurances that Supply Chains will be secure and that grocery stores will remain open.

**Farming inputs**, currently stores like feed and nursery stores are both open and closed. According to Top Shelf Feeds there are good supplies of animal feeds and they do not expect disruptions. They are considering themselves an essential service so will remain open. They have seen hoarding, and they are trying to keep up on production and limit amounts to individual purchasers and encourage folks to buy only what they need. They are currently assessing retail stores and implementing potential pickup and drive through options to ensure to keep everyone safe. Seed Suppliers like the BC Seed Coop and West Coast Seeds are reassuring folks that there are sufficient seeds but there may be delays in orders due to increased protocols in the warehouse. Some gardening stores are temporarily closed, for example Garden Works is closed until April 2.

Increasing need to **support regional food growing** has been identified and prioritized by agencies of the Good Food Network. Planning is underway on how to leverage network resources behind getting a regional movement to grow more food locally this season underway. Task force is being set up to discuss this. This will include looking at land availability, growers, inputs like seeds and making leaf mulch available, and getting garden starts going as well as leveraging volunteers. There are considerations for backyard growing (Grow a Row), community gardens and growing, as well as larger scale farming, accessing green houses, getting more land into production, community harvesting etc.

Exploring distribution networks through neighbourhood efforts (Neighbourhood houses community health centers on reserve, box distribution) and in addition the FoodShare Network, with possible implications for the Food Security and Distribution Center. A Task force is being set up around this effort. Proper protocols will need to be developed and shared to ensure that no one is putting people at risk. **Community is exploring ways to fund this work, resources will be needed.**