

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Supporting small farms and local food systems during COVID-19

AT A GLANCE

University of Idaho Extension's Community Food Systems program in northern Idaho uses technology and networking to meet local and regional food system needs during COVID-19.

The Situation

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had a significant impact on individuals, communities, businesses, and industries across the state of Idaho. Stay-at-home orders and CDC recommendations changed how individuals live and work and how businesses operate. When the pandemic hit, small farmers and ranchers faced uncertainty about access to markets, sell their products online and safely interact with customers. Local food systems experienced supply and distribution challenges, increased demand for food access resources and safety concerns.

On March 20, 2020, University of Idaho Extension's Community Food Systems program launched a statewide, online small farms and local food systems needs assessment. Over a two-week timeframe 80 people completed the needs assessment. The results of the assessment were used to identify priority education topics and develop online educational programs. Responses to the assessment indicated a need for COVID-19 specific educational programs and support for individuals, businesses and organizations transitioning online.



Face coverings and social distancing protect vendors and shoppers at the Moscow Farmers Market, June. Photo: C. DePHELPS.

Our Response

The Community Food Systems (CFS) program used the needs assessment results to address unique challenges in three main areas of the food system: small acreage farms and ranches, restaurants and food businesses, and food access. A regularly updated [COVID-19 Resources](#) page was created on the UI Extension-managed Cultivating Success™ website to provide timely, research-based information for keeping farmers, families and customers safe from farm to market. In April 2020, the CFS program, in partnership with Washington State University food safety specialists, offered a three-part webinar series on best practices for operating community gardens, farmers markets, farm stands and deliveries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The CFS program also collaborated with Idaho's Cultivating Success™ team to offer webinars on starting a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program, selling products on Etsy, looking at opportunities for food businesses beyond COVID-19, backyard poultry production and taking eggs to market.

The CFS program hosted farmers market COVID-19 operations support sessions and online sales discussions. Community support for local food and farming panel discussions educated community members about how to access local food direct from farmers, at farmers' markets and from farm-to-table restaurants. The program partnered with the Moscow Chamber of Commerce, Latah County Partnership for Economic Prosperity and the Inland Northwest Partners to host community roundtables with business owners, mayors, state legislators and the Idaho State Department of Commerce about COVID-19 impacts and resources. CFS faculty also facilitated statewide roundtables with independent restaurants, cafes and bars offering research-based information on safe operations during COVID-19 and peer-to-peer support. The program also facilitated food access community roundtables for the Palouse-Clearwater Food Coalition and supported the development of the North Central Idaho Food Access Working Group.

Program Outcomes

Though partnerships with university faculty, small acreage producers, farmers market managers and board members, community development and non-profit organizations, local governments and elected officials, and other stakeholders, the Community Food Systems program was able to respond quickly to needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The rapid, needs-based COVID-19 response from the CFS program built technical capacity and enhanced safe business operations throughout Idaho's local and

regional food systems. Through these activities, the CFS faculty provided direct COVID-19 support to 1,867 program participants:

- COVID-19 resources webpage: 277 page views.
- Best Practices for COVID-19 & Small Farm Webinar Series: 711 participants.
- Farmers Market COVID-19 Operations Support Sessions & Online Sales Discussions: 62 participants from eight markets across the state.
- Community Support for Local Food & Farming Panel Discussions: 59 participants across Latah and Kootenai counties.
- Business, Commerce & COVID-19 Legislative and Community Roundtables: 443 participants.
- Restaurant & Other Food and Beverage Establishment Roundtables: 124 participants across the state.
- Palouse-Clearwater Food Access Roundtables and North Central Idaho Food Access Working Group: 191 participants and two new fixed food pantry sites and one mobile site in Moscow.

Community Food Systems faculty also provided technical assistance to transition other UI Extension in-person events, like the Sustainable Ag Speaker Series and 10 Acres and A Dream workshop, to virtual platforms.

The Future

The program will continue to respond to the existing and emerging needs COVID-19 has created throughout north Idaho's food system by providing research-based education and technical support. The program will also work with community partners to plan post-pandemic activities and events that will allow Idaho's food-based businesses to rebound and continue to contribute to the local economy and the growth of vibrant and sustainable food systems beyond COVID-19.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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