



Food Systems

COVID19 Impacts and Response

Capital Region Area report from CRFAIR

Briefing Note April 3, 2020

Organizations and individuals who are working across the food system 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, institutions, and local decision makers to provide information on what is “happening on the ground” in terms of the impacts of COVID19 and the measures being taken to control its spread. We are working to respond to provide you with weekly updates, please be aware that this information is being gathered quickly in a dynamic situation and comes from multiple sources and limited capacity.

Would you like to contribute to, receive updates, have corrections or be included in meeting invitations for various impact area action groups? E-mail engagement@crfair.ca.

Following you will see two sections, one focused on **Food Access**, and a second on **Food Production and Food Availability** . **We have added a summary in each section as the report is so lengthy this week.**

Weekly Roundup on Food Access

Summary - Multi sector partnerships are working to support second wave food insecurity impacts of economic slowdowns. Efforts are looking to support an increasing number of people who have never accessed emergency food resources in the past. Community agencies and partners like the School Districts and Island Health are looking to assess the scale of need and appropriate responses based on existing and new infrastructure and programming. The Rapid Relief Fund and other donations are supporting agencies in their ability to respond. Speedy implementation is crucial as Federal and Provincial financial support programs may take some time to stabilize income. Many people who do not qualify will need additional support. Below provides an outline of the situation and responses underway.

Situation Unfolding

In the Capital Region there is a network of over 70 emergency food providers who are part of the FoodShare Network, they work together with the operational partner the Mustard Seed to undertake the Food Rescun Project through the Food Security and Redistribution Center on Viewfield Road.

Members of the FoodShare Network Steering Committee are meeting regularly to assess the evolving situation and support each other. Below are the key issues identified and current actions being explored and “in action” to ensure that everyone who needs food in the region is getting what they need.

Donations are rapidly growing to support emergency food distribution. This is happening through the Rapid Relief Fund, appeals to citizens to donate food, and also to providing gift cards.

In the last week there was a surge of food donations to the Food Security Distribution Centre as many restaurants and other outlets curbed their operations. The warehouse has implemented strict COVID-19 protocols and is open weekdays to support donations and distribution efforts.

Most agencies were already acting at maximum capacity related to emergency food and meal needs in the community. The current concern is that as economic impacts are being felt and may be exacerbated going forward. There may be significant new needs from people who have never accessed support in the past. Concern being raised by agencies is not that there is a lack of food but more so expecting a growing lack of economic access to it. This will create a significant pressure on already tapped services with decreased volunteers and staff. An additional stress is that many agencies that are associated with social housing are also grappling with potential impacts of outbreaks and concerned with capacity to adequately respond.

Responses Underway

Federal Funding has also been announced in support of these efforts: <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2020/04/03/prime-minister-announces-support-food-banks-and-local-food>

The Government of Canada will provide funding to national, regional, and local organizations across Canada that are able to reach people and communities experiencing food insecurity. These organizations – including but not limited to Food Banks Canada, Salvation Army, Second Harvest, Community Food Centres Canada, and Breakfast Club of Canada – will work with partners to meet the urgent food needs of Canadians, including Indigenous peoples and Northern populations. The \$100 million investment is divided as follows:

- \$50 million to Food Banks Canada
- \$20 million divided evenly between Salvation Army, Second Harvest, Community Food Centres Canada, and Breakfast Club of Canada
- \$30 million for local-level organizations who serve people experiencing food insecurity

Funding will be delivered through the Government of Canada's Local Food Infrastructure Fund.

Western Communities organizing:

There is a collaborative effort ramping up in the Western Communities. Last week the Western Communities Roundtable held a Rapid Assessment Response and Recovery meeting that was attended by School District 62 Healthy Schools Coordinator, Trustees, City of Langford, City of Colwood, MLA Mitzi Dean, emergency food providers and networks, Lohbrunner Farm and many others. Key concerns are that many vulnerable families may not be able to access current supports and services. Another concern is that the Luxton and Goldstream Farmers markets are looking at not opening which are two community access points for local food as well as ways for local farmers to sell their goods. A steering committee has formed to better understand the evolving needs and develop action strategies through schools, community agencies and the *West Shore Child, Youth & Family Centre* to support residents.

Downtown Core: There is a significant effort underway pairing local restaurants with emergency housing in the downtown core for the most vulnerable in our city. This effort is seeing restaurants who are closed opening their kitchens and employing their staff in getting together appropriate food and meal supports for this population.

Boxes of Hope: The Greater Victoria coalition to End Homelessness is working with several local Victoria restaurants who are pulling together to help others in need and keep their kitchens open. Every \$10 donated provides a warm healthy meal to someone in need, supports our local restaurant community and helps to keep restaurant staff employed. Boxes of Hope launched March 20, 2020 and is currently delivering 200 meals each night.

Seniors: Safe Seniors, Strong Communities initiative is underway. The Province, in collaboration with bc211, Better at Home, and United Way's across the province, recognize that community agencies and individuals are eager to mobilize to aid our seniors in the community whose vital support systems have been disrupted by COVID-19. The Safe Seniors, Safe Communities program allows volunteers to be connected with seniors in their region who need help with grocery shopping, meal prep and prescription pick-up or to receive friendly check-in calls. They are directing seniors in need of support or, folks wishing to volunteer, to call or text 2-1-1 or visit bc211.ca to register.

Schools: School District 62 has a contract with Truffles to cater their meal programs. They are currently shifting to use three community drop off sites to deliver meals to 300 students who are regular participants in the daily meal programs. They are providing packages of five meals to each student/family for the week in the weekly drop off. SD62 has also created a resource for the district on key community supports for food, housing, and other services.

School District 61 and 63: Starting April 3, deliveries will commence to the children in the 20-30 schools that normally have daily lunch programs in the districts. School Districts are continuing their contract with Truffles to drop off weekly packs of 5 meals to the students as well as a supplemental family meal to a few schools acting as hubs for pickup.

Good Food Box Program: The Good Food Box program that is operated by Fernwood NRG and provides grocery boxes to people throughout the region, and also provides subsidized and free boxes through the Gift of Good Food Program is under pressure to expand. Additional resources are being allocated and planning is underway to determine how this program can be amped up to serve more broadly.

Emergency Access List: A list of available foods and distributing agencies around the region is being updated weekly. A second list for the School District 62 area has also been compiled. A list of food programming and services in the region can be found here: [PANDEMIC COMMUNITY RESOURCES](#)

Volunteers: Many agencies have lost their employees or volunteers, there is an effort underway to reach out to volunteers and there are now over 100 on the list! These folks can help with food preparation, delivery etc. Contact coordinator@foodsharenetwork.ca

First Nations: There have been meetings to determine best responses with First Nations Health Authority, Nations Health Directors and other supporting agencies to understand what is happening in communities. Some communities on the island are closing their communities to protect elders. There are emergency funds going to support some of the programming, however some important programming like Head Start has been suspended. The [Sᵂ,ŁENENITEL](#) Initiative supporting access to traditional foods and medicines put out a call for funding and has received over 20 proposals with disbursements to community members and organizations underway to support access to traditional foods and medicines. Efforts are underway to expand this program up the island.

Update on the Growing Together Campaign: This Campaign by the Good Food Network is designed to support folks to grow food at home and also grow more food to share with those in need through donations to the FoodShare (emergency food) Network. This campaign will officially launch on April 14 with over 25 agencies signed on to support the efforts. Currently lists of useful plants and vegetables to grow for the FoodShare Network are being gathered to encourage folks to grow for distribution to those in need

A group of community agencies are gathering resources and support to ensure people have access to the resources they need as well as mentorship and information to be successful. Some key supports to the campaign are the following:

- Victoria City Council endorsed growing 50,000 - 75,000 food plants from seed in the municipal nursery and greenhouses in Beacon Hill Park, to be distributed to residents (along with soil and educational resources). This will be targeted to folks in the city who normally do not have access to buy starts. This effort is being tied to the Growing Together Campaign. The City will temporarily reprioritize the focus of some Parks Department capacity to grow food plants from seed in the municipal nursery and greenhouses for planting in the 2020 growing season, harnessing expertise on appropriate plant selection from stakeholders in the Urban Food Table. They will also work with stakeholder organizations in the Urban Food Table, School District 61 and local farmers to develop a distribution plan for food plants, soil and educational resources to scale up food production and increase community resilience and food security.

- Donor in Saanich provides \$5000 to a local grower to grow vegetable seedlings that will be distributed to over 200 Seniors in Saanich.
- My FED Farms led by the Food Eco District is an initiative to provide home food start up garden kits to folks that are struggling financially, starting the deliveries at the end of April. The goal is to do 20 gardens every week in April and May. The initiative is partnered with Sooke Food CHI, to undertake this work in Sooke.

Currently CRFAIR is supporting the coordination efforts, developing a communications plan, a landing page, and a system for requesting support, volunteering or donating to the initiative. For more info e-mail growingtogether@crfair.ca.

There has also been the creation of a Community Food Network across Canada and they are conducting a [COVID-19 impacts survey](#).

Weekly Roundup on Food Production and Availability

Summary - We are moving into the planting season and there is great uncertainty in the farm sector. Wholesalers are approaching farmers who are able to produce at scale to increase contracts with fears around the evolving situation with global supply chains. In particular concerns if foreign farm workers don't show up in the U.S. and Canada soon, then indeed, there will be a production shortfall in the coming months, which will place even greater stress on our food supply chains. Also compounding this is if there's a COVID-19 outbreak amongst farm workers in the US or Canada (recently at Bylands Nursery in the Okanagan) , it could also have significant impacts. There is also evidence that some countries are holding feed, rice and grains.

Smaller scale farmers that make up the majority of our regional farms sell 97% through direct sales. With some local farm markets not opening and restaurants closed, there are real concerns about farmers marketing channels. BC Farmers Market Association and the Province have implemented an online sales system and support for BC growers, however many farmers we have been in contact with are finding it challenging to adjust to learning new technologies in the height of their busy period. Anecdotally, the Cow- Coop who does online sales and delivery

to pick up depots (with approximately 30% of their sales in the Capital Region) have increased sales from an average seasonal week at \$3000 to now over \$12,000.

Seed, supplies and feed services seem to be keeping up with demand to support farms. There are questions of ferry disruptions and impacts on the Gulf Islands.

We have reached out to the Peninsula and Area Agriculture Commission to provide more information for these updates.

The Situation Unfolding and Responses

Provincial Work on Supply Chains: BC Government stepping up action on supply chain coordination establishing a new Provincial Supply Chain Coordination Unit to co-ordinate goods and services distribution; taking a more active role in coordinating essential goods and services movement by land, air, marine and rail; and suspending any bylaws that restrict goods delivery at any time of day. The Ministry of Agriculture (AGRI) is involved in the overall provincial response and participates in provincial x-ministry working groups including the Retail Working Group, Supply Chain Working Group and the Food for Vulnerable Populations Advisory Committee. Additionally AGRI has activated a number of ministry advanced planning units for Market Access & Distribution, Industry Outreach and Issues Management, Agriculture Labour, Business Supports, Seafood Sector, etc. that are all working to address issues and consequences resulting from the COVID-19 situation.

Restaurants: Restaurants are still closed for dining but some are moving to more online orders as well as even providing groceries (Earl's). The Federal government wage subsidy should provide some relief to workers but there is fear that many restaurants will not make it through (<https://globalnews.ca/news/6690673/bc-restaurants-coronavirus/>). Some local restaurants are linking with emergency supply efforts such as the Boxes of Hope initiative.

Supporting local farmers: CRFAIR and other agencies are looking at ways to support local farmers through making linkages to the emergency food efforts rapidly being deployed, reaching out to restaurants and agencies who are preparing emergency meals and asking them to purchase from local sources, as well as raising money to purchase local seeds and starts from local farmers for backyard growing campaigns and efforts. This includes potentially setting up an aggregation portal towards these efforts (contact: susan@crfair.ca).

Retail: There have been significant changes in retail protocols. There do not seem to be significant shortages of any food items at this time in grocery stores. Stores are implementing social distance protocols ensuring there are limited numbers in the stores, wiping high touch surfaces, closure of deli and bulk items, plexiglass between customers and servers as well as using paper and plastic grocery bags, no outside bags permitted.

Fisheries: Currently 87% of fish are exported and these markets are closed as well as another major market-restaurants. Halibut is currently open and while fish counters are largely closed at grocery chains, they are cutting and wrapping halibut. There are efforts to look at supporting coastal community fishers and how to redirect local fish to local markets. T Buck Suzuki Foundation reports that local fisherman are supporting Indigenous communities to bring fish as coastal communities struggle with local food supply. A facebook group has been set up to support fishers:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/534898490756891/>.

Marketing Channels: We continue to see creative solutions evolving. With many marketing channels like restaurants closed, local farmers are getting organized and creative about their marketing. Some farms are coordinating with farm gate outlets that can handle higher volumes and social distancing. Others are responding to or setting up online marketing services and buying clubs. Some farms are shifting from restaurant and outlet sales to more direct to customer box programs.

Farmer's Markets: According to the BC Association of Farmers Markets (BCAFM), markets will move to support their farmers with access to an online model to continue providing consumers with locally grown and prepared food products during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is being supported by the Ministry of Agriculture. We have seen that the Moss Street Market, for example, has opened its online platform. However, it will remain open, as will the Sidney and Esquimalt Farmers Markets, restricting the vendors to food only, to social distancing measures, to no handling of product, and of course asking anyone with symptoms to stay home. We have heard that at present the Goldstream and Luxton Markets are not going to be running this year.

Local Produce Availability: Spring season harvest and storage crops currently available at the local farm stand.

- Beets
- Cukes
- Broccoli
- Cabbage
- Carrots
- Chard
- Collards
- Garlic
- Kale
- Leeks
- Parsley
- Potatoes
- Rutabaga
- Salad Greens
- Turnips
- Winter Squash
- Vegetable Seeds

Farm Service Supply Stores: Supplies and services are different for each operation. For the most part feed and supply stores are still open and are working to ensure that feed and inputs are available. Top Shelf Feeds is open with special protocols in place. Integrity Sales is open for telephone and email orders for pick up, but their store is not open. Buckerfield stores are open. Island Tractor is open with parts, service, sales, and delivery services.

Garden supply stores seem to be reopening with online orders and pickups. Smaller operations are using Used Victoria and other buy and sell sites. Chick deliveries seem to be uninterrupted with both egg and meat bird deliveries arriving.