Food and Farm Organizations Call on Ohio Leaders to Help Farmers, Farmers Markets, and Low Income Food Access

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Columbus, OH—The coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic is having far-reaching repercussions on Ohio’s food and farm system. Four organizations, the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA), Produce Perks Midwest (PPM), the Ohio Farmers Market Network (OFMN), and the Ohio Food Policy Network (OFPN) are calling on Ohio’s leaders to implement six important policies that will help small and mid-size farmers, farmers markets, and families who rely on nutrition assistance to access affordable, healthy food.

“Ohio leaders can take decisive action and ensure the survival of small and mid-scale family farmers that feed their communities and make sure the public can access much needed fresh food in a way that protects public health in the months ahead by acting on these recommendations,” said Amalie Lipstreu, OEFFA Policy Director and Vice-Chair of the Ohio Food Policy Network.

Social distancing measures and Ohio’s Stay at Home Order—are necessary to contain the spread of the virus—have resulted in lost and disrupted income for farmers who market through farmers markets, farm stands, restaurants, and schools. Farmers market modifications, such as pre-ordering and drive thru systems, have strained an already understaffed and underfunded farmers market system. In addition, many of Ohio’s most vulnerable residents have had their access to much-needed healthy, local food limited by the closures of farmers markets and restrictions on online sales.

“There is an immediate opportunity to get ahead of the forthcoming challenges and provide practical, systems-level solutions that serve all Ohioans—families, farmers, and retailers—as both an immediate response and in preparation for the months ahead,” said PPM Executive Director Tevis Foreman.

In addition to the public impact, the group’s policy recommendations, developed in consultation with Summit Food Coalition and Countryside, are designed to address the broader economic impacts of COVID-19 on Ohio’s local food systems, especially among Ohio’s already underserved communities. Nationally, from March to May 2020, alternative market channels—farmers markets, farm-to-school, and food hubs serving institutions and restaurants—are
Projected to lose more than $688 million 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.

According to farmers market grower Joan Richmond of Meadow Rise Farm in Bellville, Ohio, “My farmers market is meeting to decide how to move forward and that may mean shifting some of my sales away from direct markets, but the changes required to do that have a cost. Farmers need guidance, financial support, and help coordinating with new local food outlets. Some of the business loans in the new aid package exclude farms. We really need help to get our food to local communities as most direct-market farms don’t have crop insurance or subsidy support.”

In an effort to ensure safe and robust healthy food choices for Ohioans and some measure of stability for farmers who do not participate in commodity subsidy and insurance programs, OEFFA, PPM, OFMN, and OFPN are calling on Ohio Governor Mike DeWine and the Ohio legislature to take clear and decisive action to address these pressing needs by implementing the policies listed below:

1. **In cooperation with OFMN and others, the Ohio Department of Agriculture should swiftly issue operational guidance to farmers markets, as well as other direct market agricultural outlets, and provide resources to help them implement necessary changes, including sanitation supplies.**

“Despite being classified as ‘essential businesses,’ many farmers markets are scrambling to modify their operations to provide a safe marketplace for vendors and shoppers, and may remain closed if physical location, financial and/or staff limitations, or supply shortages prevent them from accessing the equipment, technology, and tools they need to operate responsibly,” said Michelle White, Columbus-area market manager. “Ohio farmers and food businesses rely on these markets, as do their employees and customers.”

2. **The state should develop or expand buy-up programs, such as the Ohio Agricultural Clearance Program, and pay farmers a fair price for produce, meat, and poultry items that have lost market venues and distribute them to the emergency food system.**

“These programs are needed to help farmers remain solvent and to send much-needed food into the emergency food system to support Ohioans from other hard-hit sectors that have seen wages disappear, in some cases, overnight,” said Lipstreu.

3. **The state should expand upon and increase opportunities for use of public assistance benefits with online food purchasing and delivery options, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) supplemental nutrition program.**

“There is an immediate opportunity to directly respond to the social restrictions and realities of COVID-19—especially on vulnerable populations—and mitigate the economic impacts within Ohio’s food and farming economy, while also providing long-term, systems-level solutions that will serve Ohio for years to come,” said Foreman.
4. **The state should support the immediate expansion of Produce Perks to serve rapidly growing vulnerable populations, including individuals and households receiving unemployment benefits.**

“The Produce Perks program provides a statewide infrastructure to support healthy food purchases for low-income populations that directly and immediately increase revenues for Ohio farmers,” said Ana Bird, Director of Programs for PPM.

5. **The state should provide incentives and assistance for alternative sales methods such as on-line ordering platforms, curbside pick-up at farmers’ markets, or relocating to larger public spaces in order to reduce handling at markets and promote social distancing.**

Only 8 percent 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.

6. **The Ohio Department of Commerce should include farmers selling to direct food outlets, schools, restaurants, food hubs, and produce auctions in aid packages for small businesses negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis.**

Optimistic estimates of lost farmers’ market sales may be $240 million nationally. Lost revenue may translate to the loss of farm businesses needed in the future.

“Direct market food and farm businesses are a growing sector of our economy and vital to community health. We ask the Governor and the Ohio legislature to act on these recommendations, protect these small businesses, and bolster our food system for the months ahead,” said Lipstreu.

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About OEFFA

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. For more information, go to [www.oeffa.org](http://www.oeffa.org).

About PPM

Produce Perks Midwest (PPM) is an Ohio 501(c)3 pioneering innovative solutions to address inequities within our local food systems. They serve as Ohio’s lead agency administering nutrition incentive program, Produce Perks. Their work supports Ohio families and farmers while strengthening localized economies. Learn more at [www.produceperks.org](http://www.produceperks.org).

About OFMN

The Ohio Farmers Market Network (OFMN) is a 501(c)3 that provides Ohio farmers markets, farmers, and food producers with resources, tools, networking opportunities, and a unified voice
for public policy. Our work strengthens farmers markets throughout Ohio, but has greater impact where markets collaborate with one another, their farmers and food producers, and stakeholders within their communities. Simply put, OFMN’s mission is to support and strengthen farmers markets in Ohio. For more information, go to www.ohiofarmersmarketnetwork.org.

About OFPN
The Ohio Food Policy Network (OFPN) is made up of interested people and organizations who share values and a common vision for the food system in Ohio. The Network is a social scaffolding to connect people across sectors and provide a foundation for developing the skills and expertise needed to grow and develop a food system that supports and serves all Ohioans.

The OPFN represents interested individuals, organizations, and councils dedicated to strengthening collaboration and participation in the food system. For more information, go to www.ohiofpn.org.