

# LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

## A SNAPSHOT OF MAINE'S LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM DURING COVID-19

In 2021, CDI, CEI, MFT, and MOFGA conducted a survey to see how Maine's local food system is being affected by COVID-19. The survey responses and resulting report give unique insight into several key areas that need support:

- **farmer-to-farmer marketing collaboration**
- **food safety and sanitation resources**
- **supply chain stability of farm inputs**
- **culturally supportive food needs**
- **market needs for local staple foods**
- **e-commerce and online marketing**

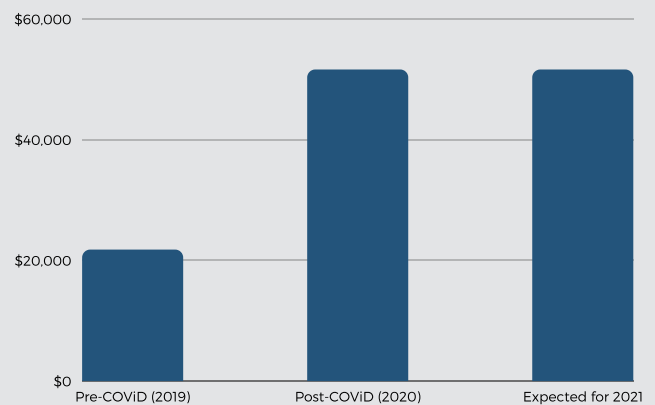


Our research findings can help inform our collaborative work in support of farms and food businesses to empower greater resilience for if/when there is another crisis that impacts our food system in Maine.

## MAJOR FINDINGS:

### **Farmer-to-farmer marketing collaboration:**

Sales of farm products to other farms more than doubled — and farmers who bought from other farmers increased their purchases by 40%. As many farms lost markets due to COVID (like restaurants, farmers markets, institutions), they needed to turn to or create new markets, and this is one of the most utilized and successful market channels that came about.



### **Food safety and sanitation resources:**

both farmers and buyers increased their food safety and sanitation practices, including the use of packaged and pre-bagged items, which matches consumers' interest in purchasing pre-bagged and bulk items.

There was great cost and stress involved for farmers and buyers to acquire new supplies and packaging, establish new food safety SOPs, and invest additional staff time in pre-bagging to meet COVID safety protocols.

**Supply chain stability of farm inputs:** among the most critical threats that farmers named were issues relating to the supply chain and their ability to successfully procure needed supplies and inputs, including issues in availability, increased costs, and market volatility. Instability around local farm suppliers, including long standing relationships with local stores, bulk purchasing options, and affordable prices, called into question the stability of farm business models for many. Supply chain issues and associated stress within Maine's food system continue, and need support.

**Culturally supportive food: the pandemic** exacerbated shortages in culturally important foods and exposed issues around access and affordability of fresh and local food. The pandemic exposed breaks in the supply of staple foods and the presence of many ill-suited alternatives, in addition to amplifying existing concerns about a greater need for fresh and affordable products.



**Market support for local staples:** most consumers prioritized local food during the pandemic and plan to continue prioritizing locally sourced food, ranking local meat, poultry, vegetables and dairy in the order of importance. Consumers in Maine have established a strong support and interest in purchasing locally produced food, and both farmers and buyers indicated a need for direct-to-consumer market support going forward.

**E-commerce and online marketing:** the utilization of e-commerce and online marketing increased for both farmers and buyers, which matches consumer's interest in increased utilization of online ordering and continued use of home food delivery. There is interest in new technologies to allow buyers more efficient ordering and purchasing from multiple, small local suppliers.

## OVERALL SUMMARY AND NOTES:

Our survey responses give us some indicators of how Maine's food system is being affected by COVID-19. Yet, since the rate of transmission is still high and the pandemic is far from over, we perceive that it's too soon to draw any conclusions about how the food system may have changed in the long term. Moving forward, we think this research must take a more longitudinal approach to test some of the assumptions about 2021.

**FIND THE FULL REPORT HERE: <https://bit.ly/3DwcsOU>**



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