Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis

These are challenging times that call for community action and solidarity. We are bolstered and humbled by the innovation and community spirit displayed in our Coalition in the face of the COVID-19 crisis.

Our chapters across the country are leading community-based solutions to this crisis. They are coordinating creative aggregation, distribution, and marketing solutions to ensure their communities can access local food, providing direct relief to vulnerable populations, and showing the value of a local food system founded on farmer innovation and centered on community.

Yet young farmers don’t always have resources to shift business strategies, especially early in the growing season. Our COVID-19 response survey revealed that 75% have reduced sales outlets and about 40% now have additional caretaking responsibilities taking them off the farm. The COVID-19 crisis is exacerbating the financial precariousness of their new farm businesses.

Relief packages are being drafted in D.C. At the same time, young farmers are telling us that their farms are in serious jeopardy.

Now is the time to act. We already sent over 4,500 letters to lawmakers urging them to include farmers in relief packages, and we were successful in securing $9.5 billion in relief for farmers. We must now work to ensure this funding is distributed to direct-market farmers as Congress intended. And as the next packages develop, we will propose bold changes that support the local and regional food system we all depend on.

Launching New Distribution Models
Our Rio Grande Chapter started Better Together, a group CSA that will offer home delivery of produce and prepared meals. They are working to expand the number of shares and offer payment via EBT. Our chapters in PA signed onto a letter to advocate for expanded use of SNAP EBT, allowing payments online and at curbside pickup, and home delivery.

Making Farmers Markets Essential
Our Rio Grande chapter was vital in advocating for clarity from both the state and the City of Albuquerque on what is deemed an essential “grocery outlet,” and were successful in keeping their farmers market open.

Interactive Farm Maps and Directories
The Four Corners chapter in Colorado created an interactive map connecting consumers to farms, farm stores, and regional farmers markets. The Mile High Chapter developed a spreadsheet of local farms and conducted an emergency needs assessment of local farmers.

Boosting Chapter Capacity
Our chapters have been working hard to ensure that they can respond to the pandemic while managing their own farm businesses. To help farmers in their region navigate this crisis, the New CT Farmer Alliance hired a part-time coordinator who is organizing an online collective of farmers to facilitate local food distribution.
Highlights from 2020 Quarter 1

COVID-19 Response

This quarter, our staff dramatically shifted gears to help farmers navigate the uncertainty of the COVID-19 crisis. We first released a statement on COVID-19 and its impact on young farmers. To address the diverse needs of our farmer network, we are regularly updating a FAQ page and we launched an online resource library including resources such as a tool to help farmers shift to online sales, a state by state resource guide, and other resources addressing topics such as mental health, food safety, and farm worker support.

State Policy Advocacy

State governments are facing tough fiscal choices. Without federal stimulus, states will struggle to implement policy changes tied to increasing funding or establishing new resources; from grants for young and beginning farmers, to agricultural conservation easements, and from student loan debt forgiveness to support for access to healthy foods. As we continue to push our state policy priorities forward, we are also connecting our state policy advocacy to our federal policy advocacy, including support for state budget stimulus funding in the next stimulus bill.

In New York, we are advocating for the expansion of eligibility to the Young Farmers Loan Forgiveness Incentive Program. In Pennsylvania, we are coordinating with partner organizations to advance conversations on workforce development and investment in urban agriculture. In Colorado, we are advocating for the state budget to include funding for a farm to food bank program, and we are moving forward with our collaborative efforts to design a soil health policy that works for Colorado farmers and ranchers.

Chapters Engage in Racial Equity Training

Our coalition and chapters are committed to centering racial equity in our work to create a better future for agriculture. Last year, we won funding to host racial equity trainings with our chapters in the Northeast and to create a toolkit for farmer leaders and chapters to lead conversations on racial equity in the food system. This winter, over 70 farmers from our Northeast chapters participated in Uprooting Racism trainings, led by our incredible partners at Soul Fire Farm. This training is a theory and action workshop for environmental and food justice leaders to uproot systemic racism in our organizations and society.

“The training went so well. We are thankful for the funding and coordination on your part that made it happen! I have been privy to several follow up conversations reflecting on themes we discussed in the training and looking forward to addressing inequity and racism in our state, organizations, and farms.”

– Will O’Meara, Waldingfield Farm, CT
New Mexico Food and Farms Day

In February, young farmers from across New Mexico joined forces at the Roundhouse with the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council for New Mexico Food and Farms Day. Members from both the Rio Grande Farmers Coalition and the Northern NM Young Farmers Coalition met with 15 state legislators on food and farms day to advocate for key legislation and programs that support farmers and ranchers across the state such as the Agriculture Workforce Development Act, Healthy Soils Act, the Agriculture and Natural Resources Trust Fund, and the Farm to School and Farm to Senior Center programs. Young Farmers members along with representatives from Rocky Mountain Farmers Union attended a meeting with Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham to advocate for the Healthy Soils Act and the Agricultural and Natural Resources Trust Fund. As a result of the meetings held with legislators during Food and Farms Day, important programs such as the Healthy Soils Act, Farm to School and Farm to Senior Centers received funding!

Food Safety Guidebook

We released our new food safety guidebook, A Small Farmer’s Practical Guide to Food Safety, just in time for spring! Our Business Services team, led by Cara Fraver, published this handy guide to help farmers uphold their high food safety standards. Spring is when farmers put in place the practices to take them through the season – and we’re thrilled to see so many of our farmers make use of this tool to keep their food safety standards as high as possible.

The accompanying online resource library has been widely used by over 1,000 farmers in our network and includes resources such as training agendas, template standard operating procedures (SOPs), how-tos for setting up hand-washing stations and other necessary infrastructure, and much more!
In partnership with Organic Valley, young organic farmers and ranchers from across the country flew to D.C. this winter to advocate for funding to address land access, organics, and climate change. We timed the fly-in to engage during a critical time in the appropriations process and push for federal funding to programs including the Tenure, Ownership, and Transition of Agricultural Land (TOTAL) Survey which would provide comprehensive data on farmland ownership, tenure, transition, and entry of beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. These nine farmers met with 29 Members of Congress or their staff to share their experiences and make the case for supporting young farmers through federal programs.

Listening to Farmers on Soil Health
The havoc wrought on Midwest farms by historic flooding in 2019 brought the impacts of climate change on U.S. agriculture to national attention. But for young farmers across the country and in the state of Illinois, last year is just one more season defined by a “new normal” of unpredictable weather and uncertain yields. Our recently released Illinois Soil Health Report is part of our ongoing effort to amplify the need for comprehensive climate action and to highlight the ways young farmers are leading the way with climate resilient practices.

"I felt welcomed and like my voice was heard for the entirety of the fly-in. You did a great job picking passionate, involved farmers who really believe in their work."

– Alexis MacDonald, Maine Dairy Farmer

Your support made this work possible, but there is still more to be done. Together we can make a better future for agriculture.

Thank you for supporting the National Young Farmers Coalition!