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[Music]

Intro: Welcome to the young farmers food safety focus group series. I'm Maggie Kaiser, the produce safety training coordinator for the National Young Farmers Coalition. Throughout the summer of 2020, I, along with Bre Sliker, Billy Mitchell and farmer facilitators from across the country, hosted a series of focus groups with farmers, where we discussed the challenges and successes of implementing various on-farm produce safety practices. We recorded them because we want these conversations to be a resource for you. In every session we bring together farmers with similar experiences for a discussion about a specific farm food safety topic. We begin each one with a farmer presentation followed by a roundtable discussion where farmers share problems and solutions with one another. We hope you enjoy them and find some practical information for your farm.

[Music]

[1:09]

Maggie: Hi everyone, my name is Maggie Kaiser. I'm the produce safety training coordinator with the National Young Farmers Coalition on the business services team. I am also a part of my local chapter of the National Young Farmers Coalition in New Orleans, as a farmer and nursery grower. I just want to mention that the goal of this focus group is to create a space for all of you to troubleshoot produce safety issues around certain topics. So, today's topic is farm to school. It will be with other farmers, but also will have several service providers on the call today, so I think that will offer an interesting dynamic. This focus group is will help us understand by the day-to-day food safety challenges and solutions on small scale produce farms. So, we're going to go around and do introductions. I will ask Brienne and Billy to go first since you're two of the other people that are helping facilitate these focus groups and then we'll pass it around from there. So Bree, would you like to go first?

[2:19]

Bre: Yeah, absolutely. Hi everyone, thanks for being here. My name is Bre and I am currently interning with the business service team at the National Young Farmer Coalition. I am also an NYU graduate student in the Food Studies program.

[2:38]

Billy: Hey all, my name is Billy Mitchell. I work for the National Farmers Union doing food safety education around the country and do farm-to-school work in Georgia, which is where I live. Before this, I was a vegetable farmer and sold successfully and unsuccessfully to a couple of schools.

[3:00]

Natalie: My name is Natalie. I have been in the farming world for a few years now. I taught environmental ag manage farmers markets and then became a farmer myself in Park City, Utah. Currently, this year I made a switch and am now managing a community garden and during the school year I teach in a school. So, I was just very interested in figuring out how within Park City we can bridge those gaps. I am excited to be here.

[3:26]

Ashley: I'm Ashley, I'm from Kansas City and I run two farms. I run an urban farm called Splitlog Farm, which provides food and education to 40 families, five early education centers, and five grade schools. We also do farm to school education, so, I go into schools and teach. Before COVID-19, we were starting garden clubs and cooking clubs and had a lot of plans. I'm here to see what everyone else is doing because the challenges are high right now for how we're going to get farm to school back into the

classroom. Also, the Food and Service director has cancelled local food for right now because they don't want to handle the liability. So, we're having some issues there. I wanted to hear what how everyone is working with other people and the challenges you have been facing as well.

[4:25]

Elena: I'm Elena Pythono and I'm a program manager with the National Farm-to-School Network. Currently, we're working on producer training program and part of my goal in being here today is hopefully, mutual. It is learning what are some of the innovations that are happening on the ground that are helping producers continue to keep a foot in the door, or what are those needs? We want to be able to start targeting our training program and then at the National Farm School network also to start targeting more of our producer training work in a broader sense.

[4:58]

Erica: Hello I am Erica Rincon. I am the New York State campaign organizer for the National Young Farmers Coalition. In my other life, I am the farm-school coordinator for the Beacon City School District. So, I'm here a though in both capacities though mainly as a farm-school coordinator. I'm here just to listen in, ask questions, and hear what everyone's experiences are. I will invite Sarah Simon.

[5:35]

Sarah: Thank you Erica. It's nice to see you! Erica and I worked together for a long time and it's great to have you here today to tag team the presentation piece. I'll be talking a little bit about the work I was doing as farm director at common ground farm, which is a farm and food justice organization that I'll talk more about later. Currently I'm in Maine, where I just started a new role as director of firm viability and farmland to access programs at The Maine Farmland Trust. I am looking forward to talking with all of you and hearing about your experiences. I think Sebastian is the only one who hasn't gone yet.

[6:10]

Sebastian: My name is Sebastian and I'm from Vitality Farms Company. We've been farming in Lakeland, Florida for about a year and a half and we're not in schools at this point, but ultimately our goal is to increase the nutrition at the school level. I am excited to learn everything.

[6:29]

Maggie: That's great. Thank you everyone. I'm so happy to know all of you! At this point, I'm going to pass it to you, Sarah.

[6:38]

Sarah: Great, so I'm excited to share with all of you our experience with farm-to-school sales and hear about your experiences. This was really something where I think we felt like we were kind of flying blind to some extent. We were just feeling confused about how to go about connecting with the school and all the different rules and regulations. So, we spent a lot of time figuring that out, so I'm excited to share what we did and learn from all of you because I think this is such an important area for farms to be get into and explore this real market opportunity. Like I mentioned, I was previously the farm director at Common Ground Farm. My role for five years was running the farm and serving as director for the organization for different programs that we operated. We operated programs such as running farmers markets and nutrition incentive programs with a strong focus on food access. Now, I am at Maine Farmland Trust in my new role. For today, I am going to be talking about Common Ground and our experience selling to the Beacon City School District. Common Ground is in Beacon New York, which is in the Hudson Valley right along the river, about 70 miles North of New York City. It is a vibrant area that has really changed and grown in recent years. A lot of people are moving there from New York City and a lot of people commute down to the city from Beacon, and so overall, it is a very fertile place for a community farm. Common ground is a community farm, a nonprofit that has been in existence for about 20 years. The farm leases land that's owned by New York State. We lease through an intermediary nonprofit. It's very complicated land arrangement where we are growing about five acres of diversified vegetables. The

farm also runs a lot of education programs, like a summer camp, cooking programs in the public schools, and offering field trips on the farm for the local school district. This was really where our relationship with the school district began. In 2016, we started donating produce to the Beacon City School District and in 2017 we started selling typically anywhere around \$2,000 a year, which is not a huge amount of produce. We sold through a CSA style arrangement. The farm was not GAP certified, which was our food safety challenge. We were able to successfully navigate it and still sell it to our local school district. Once we had set all of this up, we wondered if it was all legal and so, through a connection with the Pace Law School Food Law Clinic, we asked them to do some research and help us figure out our own arrangement as well as create a guide for other farmers in New York state. In the process, we learned that our arrangement was legal, and we also ended up with a free guide for New York farmers, which is linked here. It is from 2018 and the world moves fast in this area, so some things have already changed. It is targeted to New York State, but as I'll talk about in a moment, a lot of these laws are federal laws that apply to school food procurement, so parts of it are relevant and it's a really user-friendly guide. It was designed to be useful for farmers and it was useful to us. I wanted to start with describing how we built a relationship with the school district. As a nonprofit, this relationship was a part of our mission and something that we were able to do. Here you see me out in the field a couple of years ago bunch of kids and a bunch of kale. Now, getting the kids out there is really where it all starts. We are showing them what the vegetables look like and we also offer a cooking component so that they're trying the food on the farm. I wanted to emphasize this piece, because even if you are a full-time farmer and this is not something that's within your time or area of expertise, finding your local nonprofits or PTA board school boards are your allies to create the desire and demand for local produce in schools. We really learned how important this was when we decided to talk to another school district about selling produce. The New York City school district, which is right across the Hudson River from Beacon, had the response that they just did not think kids were going to eat turnips. We had realized in Beacon that we had spent years prior having kids to the farm, showing them the turnips, and getting them to cook and try the turnips. Because of that, we had confidence that the kids would eat the turnips and more importantly the food service director at Beacon had confidence that the kids would eat the turnips. I really think that the education piece is very important, both for increasing the demand of kids wanting to eat local vegetables and to build your relationship with the schools. In addition to the field trips on the farm and cooking classes in the schools, Common Ground has a summer camp program. We also did some work getting fresh produce from our farm into the school backpack program, which is a program where kids from food insecure families were receiving backpacks full of food each week typically coming from the food banks and shelf stable food. We however tried very hard to get fresh produce in those backpacks. We also worked with the school to highlight the vegetable of the month, where the school would pick a different vegetable each month and offer a taste test and meal in the school cafeteria for kids to try the vegetable. That was a huge partnership opportunity with the school district and a garden non-profit to build relationships. The last piece that we did was offering professional development for food service directors. This was a surprise to me and may surprise you as well but most school kitchen do not resemble real kitchens. Instead, they are glorified microwaves that really does not do a lot of fresh food processing. Depending on your school district, they may not have the capacity and capability to even make good use of the fresh vegetables. It is a real capacity problem that we decided to address in a few different ways. We offered a training and tried to help the school districts receive funding. Again, it is beyond the scope of what a farmer could or would want to provide, but, finding our allies and local groups around us was very important in our experience. We got started by donating, which was a really great arrangement for us. It was not a huge amount of produce but the idea behind it was the relationship building. In 2017, I was promoted from being on the farm crew to being the farm director. At this point, I started exploring a sale arrangement. What we tried and ended up continuing was a CSA style sales arrangement, known as the micro-purchase agreement. Because the value of the purchase is less than \$10,000, we were able to put together an agreement where we outline the different types of produce we were going to provide to the schools throughout the year. We would meet in the winter and talk our agreement through. We would typically try to do a month's worth of lettuce in the spring and another month in the fall. We would also offer the vegetable of the month because that was a focal point in the school cafeteria that

we really wanted to provide a local product for. We also provided snacks throughout the summer because some schools do offer summer meal programs. There is a sales opportunity throughout the summer even though it was less of a significant amount of produce than would normally be going out during the school year. We did establish pricing based on comparable numbers from last year's season. So, pricing is a bit of a challenge because the school's food service directors do need to show that their pricing is comparable to what's available on the wholesale market at large. On certain items, in our experience, offer a slight premium for local items, but for the most part they needed to make sure that they weren't showing any kind of favoritism. Karen, who is the food director in Beacon, would look at what romaine lettuce sold for last spring and we would put in an approximate price. That allowed me to make the decision about whether the price was worthwhile for us and it meant that she was able to conduct due diligence in making sure that she was not going to pay more for our lettuce than she would be for other comparable local lettuce. Again, she was making the comparison to local products, which is important because the lettuce coming from across the country might be priced very differently. The pricing was a challenge because we were having to go on these estimates in the winter season and things could change in the wholesale market between when we made this agreement in the summer. Although, I will say that I do not recall that ever being an issue. It never happened in our situation that all the sudden the price of romaine lettuce had plummeted. So, again, we are not gap certified, which is a challenge. What we learned from our later research with the law school clinic is that gap certification is not a requirement for school districts. Instead it is a recommendation and a lot of school districts do require it, but ours did not. What Karen decided to do is an in-person food safety inspection, which included a lot of the same things a gap certifier would be looking for, but she did it herself. We were already doing the basic things like the organic standards, testing the water once a year, washing our plastic bins, and storing things cold. Karen did request that we start sanitizing our wash water, which is something that pretty easy to start doing. She also asked that we not use burlap on the vegetable bins. We were previously wetting and reusing burlap to keep things humid but because we were reusing it that was a food safety concern. She also asked about excluding animals from the field, which is hard. Canada geese were a big problem on our farm and they would just fly in and there is not much you can do about it besides going out there with a gun, which was not even an option for us because we were on state land. So, that was an issue and it was something that we were eventually able to address. We had some plastic deer fencing that was not completely effective and so there was a concern about deer poop in the field. We dealt with that by investing in a metal deer fence, which is quite expensive and was difficult for us to commit to doing on leased land, but we felt that was really going to be worthwhile for food safety and to prevent our plants from being eaten by deer. Another challenge was just getting the produce to the schools. We were very fortunate that our farm just happens to be across the street from where the school district stores their school buses, so they were able to come and pick up the produce. Again, that is something that differs case to case. For us it wasn't an issue, but I could see it being a challenge. As I mentioned the pricing was another adjustment to make. The pricing again reflects a lot of wholesale pricing on the commodity market, which was lower than a lot of small diversified local vegetable farms are used to selling. We found that there were some items that demanded a lot of hand labor for us and our system, things like potatoes and beans, that really were not worthwhile to sell. However, we found other items, like lettuce and basil, that were pretty cost effective for us given that we were selling thousand heads of lettuce a week during these months. It felt really worthwhile, especially as a small farm that could grow that amount of lettuce but probably could not have moved that amount of lettuce through our other farmer market sale channels. So, we set all that up and then we wondered is this really legal? That is when we pulled in the food law clinic and we learned that it was. Again, in our particular situation our understanding at the time was that the food safety rules could vary a lot from district to district. We thought that some districts could require gap. I believe under the federal produce procurement guidelines if the purchase is under \$10,000, you can create these kinds of micro purchase arrangements that include unusual restrictions. For example, local purchasing wanting to receive bids only from local growers, which does not have the same stringent, competitive bid requirements that you would have to follow for food service directors seeking to purchase in larger amounts. Typically, there is an informal bid process and a formal bid process depending on the threshold that the food service director is going to spend. They can set certain parameters, but they are

beholden to whoever puts in the lowest bid, whereas for the micro purchases the food directors have a lot more latitude. For our situation we thought it made sense to stay below that threshold and we were able to create this micro purchase agreement. This resembled a CSA where we were agreeing to provide all these different kinds of produce throughout the season. I am happy to explain more about the formal bidding as much as I understand it from our work with the Pace Food Law Clinic if people are interested. I am also eager to hear about your experiences navigating these processes because this was a source of tensions for Karen, because she gets audited each year and must make sure that all her purchases match-up, will withstand scrutiny, and are sufficiently competitive. That's it! I am excited to talk with all of you, it felt scary when we started doing it and a little bit insurmountable to figure out how we could get paid and work through all the logistics. We were excited to be able to do this, at least in this very local way, and would love to chat with other people to hear about how you dealt with some of the challenges.

[21:53]

Maggie: I think first if anyone has any questions for Sarah regarding anything she shared in her presentation, that's probably a good place to get us going.

[22:02]

Elena: I have a question. I don't have experience with directly selling to school, but I would like to know when you approached Newburgh School District and they give you that answer of "I don't think kids are going to go for it" what kind of response would you suggest addressing that? How would you navigate that tricky question and convey the message that if you would give it chance, they would?

[22:30]

Sarah: Yeah, that's a great question. That was something we struggled with a lot and I would like to give a quick back story. I think a lot of why Newburgh was more challenging was because the city itself is so different from Beacon. So, Beacon's population, I think, is around 15,000 people. A lot of people are from New York City, and it happens to be on the train line to New York, and it is common throughout the Hudson Valley that the cities on the train side end up being more gentrified. There are more people commuting to the city compared to the cities who are not on the train side. Newburgh is across from the river on the non-train side with the population of around 30,000 people and is much more racially diverse. There is a larger immigrant population and a larger poverty rate as well. So, it's a different demographic than in Beacon. I think when we talked to the food service director, part of what she was saying was the kids here would not go for that. I think she also emphasized that her primary concern was just feeding a lot of kids who were coming from food insecure households. I had meant to mention this in my presentation, so I will mention it now. Different school districts are community eligible, which means that all the kids there receive free meals and Newburgh is community eligible. So, I think that made a difference as well. Beacon is not community eligible, which means that the kids in the cafeteria are purchasing meals. Part of the incentive for Karen to work with us was that her meals would be more attractive to parents who wanted to feed their kids healthy food which allowed her to market herself by saying I'm buying from local farms. In a community eligible school district like Newburgh, kids are just going to eat whatever is there, regardless. There's not the same need to try to sell the product. Also, I think that the food service director just wasn't a local food champion yet. Our reaction coming away from that was we need to kind of work on her and show her the value of this through programming. That was our initial response, which we were able to do as a nonprofit. We were able to think of what kinds of programs we could introduce to create the demand for the kids and to build the relationship with the food service director as well. It's a huge job. For those of you who haven't interacted with food service directors yet in your lives there, they are kind of superheroes. I mean, they're responsible for so, so much. They design the menus and manage the staff. It's just a big job. We were receptive to her just feeling overwhelmed by the thought of buying local, but we did think, I think we can do this if we build the relationships.

[25:12]

Erica: I can just add one more little piece of the relationship with the Newburgh food service director, having continued this relationship building in my capacity as the farm-to-school coordinator in Beacon. Karen and the other food service directors in the area have expressed a lot of confusion around how to purchase locally. They have been very clear that they feel like there is a lack of training from the USDA when it comes to local procurement and that was a major frustration. You know it is so complicated that I can't blame her at all. It's extra complicated because these regulations do change frequently and you will hear from many different stakeholders that certain things will be allowed or not allowed, and then you hear when it comes time for reimbursement that this was not allowed or that you weren't record keeping in the correct way. This has caused and cost school districts a lot of money in the past when you find out after the fact that you're not being reimbursed, so that can also be a major barrier. A lot of counties now, at least in New York State, do have farm-to-school coordinators, many of whom have much more procurement knowledge than I do. Working with them to help build those relationships and navigate that procurement process has been helpful. We have also been continuing to complain back that there needs to be more clarity in the process.

[27:03]

Maggie: I have a question for those that are on this call that already have relationships with schools, what is that relationship looking like right now, and what are you planning for the fall? For those that don't have relationships yet with schools, but is something that you had hoped you were going to be working on, are you still pursuing it? How have things changed, and I know it's July, but I am just kind of curious how you are thinking about the future?

[27:37]

Natalie: How many people in here actually already sell or deliver food to school right now?

[27:44]

Ashley: Okay. So, I guess one thing I would say for what Sarah was saying about the challenges with schools and them being open to new vegetables is that one we're right across the street from the school as well, so the kids get to come over and work in our farm as well. Then we started to partner and expand out to other schools, one of them being the Guadalupe center that went after a Health Forward Grant that basically worked on revamping their kitchens. So, we worked with them to do kitchen assessments and we were just beginning to start scheduling training for them for their chefs. We were even going to try to get the kids food safety handlers permits, because one of the schools is a high school. It would be like killing two birds with one stone being able to not only get them to work with the food and help prep it for the school, but they would also learn a skill while they were there. We must go back to the drawing board right now for what we're doing with early education centers, since they have lost a lot of funding. We are applying for grants that will help us purchase food from local farmers to provide to families or to these institutions. My farm, Splitlog, cannot handle everyone. So, our goal is to partner with other organizations and other farmers to get food to people. One of the ways we did that was through tastings. We would have a chef come in and do tastings in the cafeterias and the kids would be able to try different kinds of food. I think that is a really good way, if you are going to reach out to a school, to offer to do tastings or a cooking class. I was getting involved in their life skills coaches to teach and to get connected. That is where you can really get some excitement going. For the future, we do not really know what's going to happen. Everything is just up in the air. We are just trying feed as many people as we can on the side.

[30:09]

Maggie: Billie and Elena, I also want to invite you to answer this question if you have any intel about other farmers that you know of and what they are planning.

[30:21]

Elena: Sure, I work with the National Farm-to-School Network now, but previously I worked in the state of New Mexico to help really expand our partner cafeteria work. It was all rooted in that fine balance between

business and program, right? Having that partner for the programmatic support I think is so, so critical. We see that the schools that do have that right now are faring a little better in terms of accessing things like CACST or summer food, than farms that you know have no relationship with schools and vice versa. So here in New Mexico, the farmers that I've worked with and that are still selling to schools, they've managed to continue the level of sales and volume of sales, but honestly, there's been very little to no, as far as I know, interest in establishing new vendors in these systems for local food. The schools just don't have the capacity to take on the little bit of extra work having that program partner entails, which is ideally from a nonprofit or a community service like boys and girls. Also, those with the relationships in place seem to be able to continue to access some of the farmers that have done it for a few years. Some of these farmers are willing to Co-op in a real casual way like "let me see if I can help you market some to fill the gaps." That's been promising with things like melons or tomatoes, which are easier to aggregate in a low-tech way and that aren't as high of a food safety issue. I think that's something we're kind of trying to track with some examples here in New Mexico and Arizona.

[31:58]

Billy: I think there's an incredible amount of uncertainty like Elena said to take on even an extra thing right now just feels insurmountable. For the smaller ones that are exploring it there, all the parents are asking about food safety. There's no evidence to show that you can get coronavirus from food, but parents are asking about cleaning, sanitizing how it's going to be delivered. There are some new considerations for farms that are exploring those markets.

[32:29]

Elena: No one had talked about postharvest stations yet. One of the things that I have challenges is the requirement of certain types of sanitization. So, I have a personal question about what you guys were using to sanitize with that is organic?

[32:44]

Sarah: Yeah, that's that was a big learning curve for us too, we hadn't been using any sanitizer. We ended up buying an omri certified sanitizer so it was a chemical, but organically approved. I can look up the exact name and send that to you. I can't remember, it's not coming back to me. Do you remember by chance, Erica? No. I'll find the brand name. It was very noxious, so you have to dilute it and we had to come up with systems for diluting it to use it in the wash water. It was a requirement for ours that things needed to be washed and packed and we do have a cooler, which I'm not sure that's necessarily a requirement, but I think they were interested in having the cold storage capacity as well for food safety reasons. So, that might be something just to keep in mind. We didn't pursue a gap certification, but Cornell Cooperative Extension in New York State has some nice bare bones gap certified, gap eligible wash setups that made me think that ours might even have been eligible. Similar wash areas just used a little wire cover for the table because what the table surface is made from can be an issue sometimes. So, they had just found creative low-cost ways to set up a gap eligible system. That was neat to see. A problem that we had that I did not mention before is that because the land is leased from the state, we always had real constraints around putting in any sort of permanent infrastructure. Basically, any permanent building and anything that might have some concrete floors or real foundation was off the table. That was a challenge because one of the things we would have liked to do for school sales is to think about having year-round wash capacity. In any rate, that was always the real challenge for us too whenever we wanted to think about enclosing our wash station, which currently only has a roof.

[34:54]

Maggie: Also, Ashley, you said that you were researching bio...? What was the word that you said?

[35:01]

Ashley: Biosurfactant

[35:03]

Maggie: I don't know anything about biosurfactants.

[35:05]

Ashley: It's good bacteria essentially so it be the same thing I've ever heard of using kombucha to clean with. It's the same aspect here, and that kills any other bad bacteria. That way you're doing it in the most sustainable way possible without adding any chemicals into the soil. I'm also looking into the same thing just for soil replenishment.

[35:33]

Maggie: Billy, have you seen anything around biosurfactants?

[35:38]

Billy: Yeah, I've heard of it before. I know that there's research on it in the food industry and thanks for whoever put that link in for the Omri approved. So, there are organic sanitizers which are still chemicals, but really at the end of the day, I would make sure that there's some type of scientific study to make sure that it's really addressing those produce safety risks. Then double check with your buyer to make sure that it's going to meet their expectations as well. There's a lot of interesting research around there, I just don't know if there's enough to convince a school just because oftentimes kids can have weaker immune systems than adults, and so they might set a higher standard.

[36:17]

Elena: Yeah, this is Elena, and I was just going to jump in to say I know that there's been quite a lot of work done on trying to align FISMA and FDA requirements with organic standards of some of these things like biosurfactants and other cleaners. It's a part of the dialogue. I would say it was super helpful to have you bring it up directly because we can have someone in our policies team take a look at it specifically. They're still taking recommendations for state level implementation, so the federal rules are established, but the states have to figure out how to do it. There's still this moment where there's demand like this and it's great to be able to funnel. I would say also with the school, the standard is always a little bit different, but right now, people are moving toward gap certification because of FISMA. That said, at the state level issue, and as far as I know, I think Arizona is one of the only states that mandates it, so it's a barrier. However, a little bit of relationship building, and a little bit of local level advocacy can also change that.

[37:24]

Ashley: I found D bioscience agriculture cleaning products which can be used in all sorts of applications throughout the farm.

[37:31]

Maggie: Cool, thanks for sharing that Ashley and I copied all the links from the chat box so I can send them out to everyone in an email after this. I just wanted to see if there were any lingering questions or comments from anyone on the call.

[37:48]

Ashley: I will say that just reading this, it says that it fights things like salmonella, staph, strep and e coli, which is cool.

[38:01]

Billy: Yeah, thanks for sharing this. I'm interested to learn more about this for sure.

[38:06]

Maggie: With that, thanks so much!

[38:10]

Elena: Thank you!

[38:11]

Maggie: Yeah!

[38:14]

Everyone: Thank you, have a great day.

[Music]

[38:17]

Maggie: Thanks for listening to our produce safety focus group series. For visuals from the presentations, more information on this series, and other produce safety resources, visit [YoungFarmers.Org/focusgroups](https://YoungFarmers.Org/focusgroups). This podcast was edited by Hannah be LAN recorded in partnership with the National Farmers Union Foundation over the summer of 2020 as part of our FSOP produce safety programming.

[Music]

[38:46]

*Transcribed by Mackenzie Jeter, The National Farmers Union*