



Growing Community Health & Wealth Through Food



**Local Farmers As First Responders
During The COVID-19 Pandemic:
A New Hampshire Case Study**

Resource Prepared by Fair Food Network

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Introduction

In March 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, independent grocers in the Northeast were forced to adapt their businesses seemingly overnight. Simultaneously, food insecure shoppers faced increasing challenges to feeding their families. As founder and CEO at Fair Food Network Oran Hesterman wrote in his May 2020 op-ed, “This pandemic is giving us a wake-up call about the fragility of our supply chains, especially the one on which we all depend: food” (Hesterman, 2020).

As the waves of uncertainty due to the pandemic continued to roll in month after month, a few institutions held firm, anchoring these businesses and their customers alike, to reliable food sources to help weather the storm. In New Hampshire and neighboring states, the network of local farms continued to plant, harvest and deliver fresh produce daily, supplying grocers and customers with healthy food when they needed it most. As the following case study explores, a resilient local food system combined with nutrition incentive programs like [Double Up Food Bucks](#) (Double Up) help fill the gap and meet the needs of grocers and families during challenging times.

Data Collection Methodology and Timeframe

Interviews were conducted for this report throughout the spring of 2020 with follow up interviews conducted in December of 2020. All interviewing and data evaluation was conducted by Liz Alpern, program manager at Food Fair Network. The original hypothesis for this article was developed with Alpern and Angel Mendez, executive director of food distribution consultancy Red Tomato, in late April of 2020 in direct response to observations in the grocery field during the earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Store data on purchasing and sales was provided by store management.

Independent Grocers and the Effect of COVID-19

One of the primary challenges for grocers brought on by the pandemic was the unpredictability of shopping patterns. As Pat Cotter, manager of Monadnock Food Coop in Keene, New Hampshire, reported in the spring of 2020, it was virtually impossible to make sales projections or anticipate customer behaviors. “There just aren’t any trends when you look at the data. Some baskets are 50% larger. Some are right on par with pre-COVID,” he remarked (P. Cotter, personal communication, June 2020). One thing was certain, however – in the first several months of the pandemic, grocery sales were up overall, and stores were struggling to keep shelves stocked. As John Cohen, store manager of EM Heath in Centre Harbor, New Hampshire, reported, “We saw summertime business in March...we increased our business significantly, especially in produce because people are home to prepare things” (J. Cohen, personal communication, November 2020). Similar sentiments were echoed by Cotter: “In March and April we sold out a lot faster of the root crops and storage vegetables than ever before” (P. Cotter, personal communication, March 2020).

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- Pat Cotter, manager of Monadnock Food Coop

Retail sales were undoubtedly boosted by increased sales through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—formerly known as food stamps. Third quarter (Q3) SNAP sales at the Monadnock Food Coop were up 80% from the same period in 2019 (P. Cotter, personal communication, December 2020). At EM Heath, Q3 SNAP sales in 2020 were up 94% compared to 2019 (J. Cohen, personal communication, December 2020). Finally, at Vista Foods in Laconia, New Hampshire, Q3 SNAP sales were up 64% (B. Fitzpatrick, personal communication, January 2021).

To add to the challenges brought on by the unpredictability of the retail environment, grocers were forced to reimagine the flow of their stores’ shopping experience. They introduced dedicated shopping times for seniors and other vulnerable groups, phone and online ordering and contactless pickup. Store staff increased their cleaning procedures and focused on

repackaging produce items to meet the demand for easier grab-and-go shopping. As EM Heath manager Cohen shared, all of this meant “double the work with less staff” (J. Cohen, personal communication, June 2020).

Local Supply Chain Strength

Amid the challenges outlined above, the local food system was able to continue producing and delivering high-quality produce, and farms shifted their business models to work most effectively in uncertain times. Farm businesses set up additional Community Supported Agriculture shares and farm stand hours, implemented pick-your-own options onsite, and even engaged with direct-to-customer delivery. As Red Tomato Executive Director Mendez shared, “The first responders were the local farms” (A. Mendez, personal communication, May 2020).

“The first responders were the local farms.”
- Angel Mendez, executive director of Red Tomato

Upper Valley Produce, a regional produce distributor in New Hampshire, was able to increase its weekly delivery quantities to local retailers after restaurant business declined. EM Heath took advantage of this increased produce availability from Upper Valley specifically and increased its weekly orders throughout the pandemic.

Customers and Stores Demand Local

Store managers repeatedly shared that customer demand for local produce increased significantly at the onset of the pandemic. First, there was the perception – and reality – that local produce passes through fewer hands and fewer processes to get to the customer. Local produce was perceived by customers as safer and more reliable than produce imported from far away. Further, local produce had less distance to travel, making delivery routes from nearby farms easy to keep intact. Local farmers, having lost significant restaurant business, had a surplus of produce to sell to grocers and customers alike. Bob Fitzpatrick, manager of Vista Foods in Laconia, New Hampshire, remarked on the increase of weekly deliveries from local farmers since the onset of the pandemic due directly to demand: “I found that people were buying more produce every week.” (B. Fitzpatrick, personal communication, January 2021).

The numbers at some specific retailers offer a window into impact:

- At Monadnock Food Coop, produce managers purchased 10% more locally grown produce in Q3 2020 than in Q3 2019 (J. Cohen, personal communication, December 2020).
- At EM Heath, managers purchased 16% more locally sourced produce in Q3 2020 than in Q3 2019. The store also purchased directly from 14 unique local farms, up from 11 local farms during the same period in 2019 (P. Cotter, personal communication, November 2020).

And while Vista Foods in Laconia does not track exact produce purchasing data, the store reported that it purchased as much local produce as possible throughout the pandemic, saying, “We did have more local farms deliver more during the pandemic, as we saw a total increase in demand for produce” (B. Fitzpatrick, personal communication, January 2021).

SNAP Shoppers Shop Local

Nationally and locally, SNAP sales increased dramatically during the pandemic, boosted significantly by emergency electronic benefit transfer distributions. As SNAP distribution across the country rose, so too did SNAP sales of fresh produce and participation in nutrition incentive programs like Double Up. Across 30 grocery stores participating in Double Up in seven geographically diverse states (Alabama, Colorado, Iowa, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Texas, Vermont), incentive redemptions were 171% higher in September 2020 than they’d been in January. From March through September 2020, while SNAP sales increased by an average of 14% per month, incentive redemptions increased by an average of 15% per month. Therefore, incentive redemptions were not only keeping up with increasing SNAP usage, they were surpassing it (Double Up Food Bucks, 2020).

Zooming into New Hampshire, we observed similar trends. At Vista Foods, a larger grocery store that had robust SNAP sales before the pandemic, incentive redemptions were 71% higher in September 2020 than they had been in January. Getting even more granular, in January, 53% of SNAP shoppers at Vista Foods included produce in their baskets, thereby participating in Double Up Food Bucks. From March through June, as the impact of the pandemic hit families the hardest, the percentage of SNAP shoppers including produce in their baskets would rise to an average of 66% per month (Double Up Food Bucks, 2020).

At the Monadnock Food Coop, SNAP sales on produce particularly soared during peak growing season, July to September. In fact, SNAP sales on fresh produce were up 49% from the same period in 2019. And, during the height of the pandemic lockdown in New Hampshire, from March through June, Double Up redemptions rose an average of 9% per month (Double Up Food Bucks, 2020).

The implications are clear: SNAP shoppers, impacted by the pandemic, were buying more produce, more frequently, and much of that produce was locally grown.

Local Food Systems, National Leadership

While this case study zooms in on one state—New Hampshire—similar trends have been playing out throughout the country. The GusNIP NTAE Center, led by the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition, and the [Nutrition Incentive Hub](#) coalition of partners it created, which is co-led by the Gretchen Swanson Center and Fair Food Network, is keeping tabs on the pulse of this ever-shifting landscape and the movement we see in this field. The Nutrition Incentive Hub provides valuable technical assistance and resources to nutrition incentive and produce prescription projects nationwide.

As the pandemic continues to force us all to create a “new normal,” farmers, grocers and shoppers are using their interconnectivity and resilience to be continually prepared in the face of so much change. John Dumais, head of the New Hampshire Grocers Association, shared this sentiment in late November 2020: “...everybody from the farmer to the processor to the wholesaler to the retailer, has learned that we need to have a little more reserves” (Schrieber, 2020).

References

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About

About the Author

Liz Alpern is a program manager at Fair Food Network. She has been growing the Double Up Food Bucks New Hampshire program since 2017 and has also been managing Double Up Food Bucks New Jersey and Double Up Food Bucks Boston during that time. She is particularly passionate about bringing nutrition incentives to independent retailers and food coops.

About Fair Food Network

Fair Food Network is a national nonprofit whose mission is to grow community health and wealth through food. Its work connects people to the power of food to improve health, ignite local economies, and open opportunities for all — especially in the most underserved communities.

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Red Tomato works with trusted farmers, distributors and grocers throughout the Northeast to bring customers fresh, locally grown produce.

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The Nutrition Incentive Hub

The Nutrition Incentive Program Training, Technical Assistance, Evaluation, and Information (NTAE) Center is led by the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition. In partnership with Fair Food Network, they created the Nutrition Incentive Hub, a coalition of partners to support this work, including the National Grocers Association Foundation, Farmers Market Coalition, Michigan Farmers Market Association, Ecology Center, Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at University of California, Davis, Colorado School of Public Health, Ingredients Consulting, University of California San Francisco, and University of Michigan, among others. These partners are practitioners, retail experts, researchers and evaluators from across the country bringing decades of experience and leadership in technical assistance, training, reporting, and evaluation. The Nutrition Incentive Hub is dedicated to building a community of practice to maximize program impact and ensure that all Americans have access to the healthy foods they need.

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