

Food Systems

COVID19 Impacts and Response

Capital Region area report from CRFAIR



Weekly Briefing Notes - May 5th, 2020

Organizations and individuals who are working across the food system have been meeting online to gather information about what they are seeing happen in terms of food and food systems in our communities. CRFAIR has been requested by a number of government agencies, institutions, and local decision makers to provide information on what is “happening on the ground” in terms of the impacts of COVID19 and the measures being taken to control its spread. We are working to respond to provide you with weekly updates, please be aware that this information is being gathered quickly in a dynamic situation and comes from multiple sources and limited capacity.

Would you like to contribute to, receive updates, have corrections or be included in meeting invitations for various impact area action groups? E-mail engagement@crfair.ca.

* **We are now moving to a twice monthly format, unless there are major new developments.** Please continue to provide us with feedback, we appreciate it.

Following you will see two sections, one focused on **Food Access**, and a second on **Food Production and Food Availability**. Information is updated as it becomes available. We are working to do deep listening at the community level and keep you informed around the evolving situation.

Food Access

The majority of emergency food organizations are seeing demand for food more than doubling. This is not universal as some food banks are experiencing a drop in visits. This is considered to be due to people sheltering in place. Demand for delivered hampers and hot meals continues to rise. Treska Watson who manages the Mustard Seed Food Security and Distribution Center that supplies the over 70 food provisioning agencies of the FoodShare Network says that “Certainly when COVID-19 started we were looking at maybe things would double, as a safe estimate. But the 80 per cent beyond increase has certainly blown things out of the water. We had no idea how big the need was, how quickly.”

The situation at the Rainbow kitchen, who have seen a doubling in demand for their services, is also telling of what we are seeing across the region. Patrick Johnstone, Victoria Rainbow Kitchen Society director, told CHEK that demand in March exceeded Christmas, usually the busiest time.

It is also feared that a second wave of increased need is coming as businesses close and people are out of work.

The report also says that “New faces are showing up in need of food. And in some cases, it's the whole community. Mustard Seed says outlying communities like Indigenous communities, Port Renfrew and Galiano Island, are among those finding themselves reaching out to Mustard Seed to feed their regions”.

In addition to food provisioning agencies, Schools and the School Districts are showing themselves to be a front line responders to providing food support to vulnerable families. A report was recently released by the PHABC and Coalition for Healthy School Food that outlines that:

“For many students, school food programs are an essential, irreplaceable food source and a valued part of the school day. Across the province, 75% of school districts have a meal program in at least one school (Smith, 2018). Many of these programs are run at classroom, school or school district levels, in partnership with local non-profit organizations, businesses, and school community members. With schools closed, these organizations and individuals are now redirecting their efforts and funds to ensure that their students have access to food during this time of heightened food insecurity”.

The report aims to capture these efforts and highlight the immediate impacts of COVID-19 school closures on school food programs across BC, as well as needs and opportunities for continued programming during this pandemic and beyond.

In School District 61- More than 1,000 families are receiving meals every week, with physical distancing in place, only one designated family member stops by each week to pick up the food. SD61 says the food distribution program is made possible through the Ministry of Education Community Link Funding, the Victoria Foundation’s Rapid Relief Fund and partnerships with the Food Share Network and local restaurants. They continue to expand their services, and are trying to access different healthy food options. [COVID-19: School-based lunch programs expand to feed thousands during crisis](#)

What we are hearing from local organizations in the Capital Region:

- All three School Districts are increasing their meal services and food provision to families
- Agencies are recognizing that Foodshare network coordination efforts are vital at this time and the access to fresh foods from the Mustard Seed Food Security and Distribution Center is essential
- Organizations are under incredible stress, trying to adapt to working at home as well as the expansion of their services and seeing the stress their communities, there are mounting worries about the summer, budgets running out from organizations, donor fatigue and increasing needs, this is not sustainable. Agencies are faced with huge workloads and overload, how will they deal legally with overtime and at what time are we able to say take time off? How will we continue the services?
- “every single day more and more referrals are coming in from people who have never called us”
- Seeing mental health breakdowns, supporting workers to keep people connected, isolation is a huge risk factor for drug use, and violence. In addition bottle depots are closed, no panhandling, extreme withdrawal being seen in communities. So there are so many layers that are happening with very marginalized groups. They have no ability to self isolate, they need supports but these are so difficult to provide in the shelters and hotels.

- Rapid Relief fund is supporting collaboration on the WestShore, a job posting is circulating to fill a new role in coordination of services from Sooke to Langford.
- FoodShare organizations are wanting to support local farmers as they struggle with lost markets and want to buy food, new FarmHub is looking at ways to get more local food into emergency food streams
- Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness is providing personalized nourishment boxes to help shelter in place, and also opening a house for indigenous women
- St Vincent de Paul Social Concern program on Yates is now distributing grocery gift cards
- CoolAid says their programs have stabilized and they are about to open a temporary shelter for women at the international hostel, contracting out the food service to support restaurants such as Ferris Oyster Bar
- Saanich Neighbourhood House is supporting people beyond their catchment due to needs tripling, across the CRD, from Sidney to Westshore
- SaltSpring Community Services is seeing increasing need in the community, they are working to find donors and support to increase their Farm Market Coupon Program to support local farmers - currently they have over 25 families on the waiting list.
- School Gardens going forward this season in School District 61
- Food Literacy Webinar - Seeds at the Root of Food Security featuring Joan Stonehocker of LifeCycles and Keeley Nixon from the BC EcoSeed Coop
www.crfair.ca/main-calendar/2020/4/29/webinar-seeds-at-the-root-of-security
- Growing together campaign was launched, that includes a central Growingfood-together.com website landing info from around the region that includes info for home gardeners including: videos, resource listings, supports, etc.
 - A major partner, Get Growing Victoria, will see 48,000 seedlings distributed in May . They are also working with four different agencies to distribute leaf mulch and compost. They will distribute over 60 cubic yards to four different neighbourhoods, where community garden coordinators are the site coordinators

Food Production and Availability

We continue to see impacts of the pandemic on global and national and local supply chains. In a letter to the Federal Minister of Agriculture and AGriFood and Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, local MP Alastair MacGregor summed up some of the issues emerging

“the current crisis has not only exposed weaknesses in Canada’s food supply chains and heightened concerns regarding food insecurity, but it has also significantly added to Canada’s unemployment rate. Many fishers have lost access to their traditional markets but want to find a way to support their local communities. Agricultural producers are worried about the labour shortages brought about by the pandemic, as Temporary Foreign Workers are subjected to increased scrutiny and monitoring at ports of entry to prevent the spread of disease.

The federal government recently asked Members of Parliament to help identify organizations in our ridings that could benefit from additional CSJ (Canada Summer Jobs) funding during this extraordinary year. Although the CSJ program this year is providing a 100% wage subsidy, it has come at the cost of funding a fraction of the number of jobs from previous years. Ministers, we believe that the CSJ program should be expanded so that more essential services in our food supply chains can access the 100% wage subsidy and be linked with a labour pool that is experiencing severe economic distress. In addition to our agricultural producers, there are many food banks and food delivery groups providing essential services who can use the CSJ platform to help subsidize wages”.

Elizabeth May also raised this issue of lack of sufficient funds in the CSJ program to support these types of jobs.

The Peninsula and Area Agriculture Commission, while not currently sitting, have been raising questions about farm labour and what can be done. Some members have been contacting their local Members of Parliament to determine if current Federal Benefit Programs and Canada Summer Jobs could be expanded to support farm labour.

Locally farmers continue to see increase in direct sales with farmers working together to sell at farm stands that can support social distancing. Sales are up 300-400% . Reports are that there is about a 40%-50% reduction in sales through Farmers Markets due to decreased traffic, and a few small orders coming in from restaurants doing takeout. There are a number of online systems being utilized and also the creation of a new **South Island FarmHub** regionally to support farmers with accessing new markets to divert crops destined to farm markets and restaurants to home delivery, wholesale and emergency food access programs-so far over 20 farms and over 20 agencies have signed up.

There is a major conflict brewing between Fish processors and harvesters, with processors not being supportive of harvesters custom processing for the local market. This is fueled by the ownership structures of the licence and quota system. Corporations who hold the licenses want to put off fisheries until global markets come back on line, while local fishers want to continue to harvest. Also impacting local fishers is the outbreak in Alert Bay, and one death. This is leading to additional caution in small coastal communities and fishers needing to undertake extra protocols. The Spot Prawn fishery has been delayed from opening the 4 of May to 4 of June. Prawn Fishermen are looking for direct to consumer options.

News predicts continued processing plant closures and decreases in production that project reductions in certain types of meats and produce over the next period, especially from US sources who are seeing increasing impacts. Reports from producers in the US predict we will see at least a 30% reduction in fresh produce imports from California. Meat processing plants continue to see limited processing and closures due to COVID-19 outbreaks.

The chicken board decided to reduce the total amount of chickens to be grown from May to July by 12.6 percent, to 249 million kilograms from 285 million kilograms. They stressed the decision is meant to address the issue of having too much unsold chicken because of the food-service shutdown.

<https://business.financialpost.com/news/retail-marketing/chicken-farmers-to-shrink-national-flock-by-12-as-coronavirus-takes-toll-on-canadas-food-supply-chain>

A few more recent context articles:

- [New Normal: How COVID-19 could change Canada's grocery landscape forever](#)
- Here is a link to the United Nations Food and Agriculture around the global food systems situation and the impacts of COVID19
<http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/q-and-a/impact-on-food-and-agriculture/en/>