

To: Whatcom County Council, Executive Satpal Sidhu

From: Whatcom County Food System Committee

Subject: Recommendations for Immediate Action by the Council relating to our Food System

Date: July 27th, 2020



COVID-19 is impacting almost every aspect of our lives including our food system which is essential to our survival and our economy. From our hardworking farms, to our vital distribution networks through our markets and grocery stores, to our homes, each sector of our food system is struggling to confront the impacts of this virus.

**We cannot let them fight those challenges alone.**

Recent outbreaks in congregate work settings in Yakima County highlight the vulnerability of our food system workers. The immediate and ongoing economic impacts of this pandemic have been, and will continue to be, devastating to our local farmers, grocers and consumers if left unaddressed.

The Whatcom County Food System Committee was created in 2018 by Ordinance 2018-058 to strengthen and protect our food system from seed to table, and to provide recommendations to Whatcom County Council. In the wake of the unprecedented dangers and impacts of COVID-19, we are recommending immediate action by the Council to stabilize our food system and protect the health, safety, and economic well-being of those who feed us.

We support the efforts and recommendations of local organizations working together through Whatcom Unified Command's Food Security Task Force, including recent recommendations for CARES Act funding, as well as innovative food recovery, processing, and distribution programs.

The Food System Committee has developed the following list of recommendations to the County Council based on the Committee's analysis of current challenges and weaknesses in the local food system. Many of these recommendations are directly aligned with the Washington State Food Policy Forum's "Early Implementation Action Report" (Draft) to the Governor (attached), which recommends strategies to address vulnerabilities in the food system that have become especially apparent in the light of COVID-19. The State Action Report does not address worker health and safety, however, so we have included our own recommendations on this subject, recognizing that food system workers are disproportionately impacted by the coronavirus for many reasons.

We recommend the Council take the following steps:

1. Protect the health and safety of workers across the food system equitably:
  - a. Utilize the lessons learned from the Yakima outbreaks to implement immediate, strict and aggressive safety measures at congregate work facilities in which physical distancing is not usually practiced, such as using a cohort model for workers.
  - b. Build on existing government support for a more proactive COVID-19 response for food processing facilities, farmworker housing, and other congregate working facilities.
  - c. Ensure safety for farm workers and consumers by supporting Governor Inslee's agricultural operations [Proclamation 20-57](#), by encouraging use of these strategies for all agricultural settings. These protections include: guaranteeing workers have the ability to reasonably socially distance, and have access to Personal Protective Equipment and other barriers to prevent disease transmission.
2. Stabilize our food system to benefit both local economic development and food access initiatives:
  - a. Use CARES Act funding to immediately offer year-long operations grants to Whatcom-based farmers, fishers, restaurants, and local grocers/markets impacted by COVID-19.
  - b. Seek funding for employee training for key agricultural supply chain positions to help build regional-scale production, processing, and distribution systems needed to make our food system more resilient to the pressures of a crisis such as COVID-19.
  - c. Continue and expand funding for purchases of locally grown and processed food for food banks, schools, and other food distribution programs.
  - d. Provide grants to support training and technical assistance for local farmers to develop online sales platforms to market products, given that other sales options are severely limited because of COVID-19.
3. Increase local food processing capacity to meet increased demand for prepared and packaged foods and ramp up food system capacity:
  - a. Identify storage, warehousing, and processing facilities to prepare packaged food for distribution to homes, food banks, schools, and other distribution centers, building on the work of the Food Security Task Force.
4. Increase access to healthy and local food for people dealing with economic hardship created by the pandemic:
  - a. Encourage the State to allow for flexibility in WIC and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Programs (FMNP), and SNAP and SNAP Market Match, to continue to function as farmers markets change operation models. Explore ongoing funding opportunities for these programs.
  - b. Support state and federal policies that ensure access to food assistance during this pandemic and during the recovery period.

The Committee understands that not all of these recommendations are easy or straightforward to enact but we urge swift and direct action to strengthen and protect our food system. We have opted to make recommendations that we believe are urgent, actionable, and achievable in our county. We recognize that additional food system support and recovery measures may be needed, as we move through the pandemic.

Thank you for your consideration,

Signed,

**The Whatcom County Food System Committee**

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