

Too much supply and the wrong kind of demand: America's farms and food banks cope with an agriculture industry that wasn't designed for a pandemic

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Farm-to-table has taken on a new meaning in the wake of the coronavirus.

Over the past several weeks, cars have lined up in the thousands at the nation's food banks for mass food distributions while images of farmers in Florida flushing fresh milk into a floor drain circulate the internet.

But what might appear to the naked eye as a disconnect between the American farming industry and its consumers is actually the result of an unprecedented and rapid shift in consumer behavior, juxtaposed with an economic infrastructure that wasn't equipped to adapt fluidly to the change.

Nationwide, farmers — whose perishable product is designed for sale in bulk but has nowhere to go due to vast closures of schools and restaurants — are being forced to trash it instead of being able to safely transport their goods to food banks, where the demand for food is the highest it's been in years.

The Farming Dilemma

Take the Illinois Farm Bureau for example, which experienced a 65% drop in demand from their commercial customers when the pandemic hit, according to the bureau's Director of Issue Management, DeAnne Bloomberg.

"It's been an awakening for a lot of us," Bloomberg said in an interview.

Poultry, Bloomberg said, which is almost exclusively sold in bulk to restaurants and schools, is too costly to convert into a retail-friendly delivery mechanism, such as individual egg cartons. So, although there is still a demand for the product in grocery stores and supermarkets, farmers don't have adequate resources to meet the demand without spending an exorbitant amount of money to do so.

"When you have that kind of kink in the supply chain and it all backs up, we have to dispose of (the food)," Bloomberg said.

From the farm to the food bank

Trying to donate the food in place of throwing it out has its own set of obstacles.

In a [letter](#) written April 10 and addressed to The Department of Agriculture, Feeding America and The American Farm Bureau Federation discuss the "bureaucracy and red tape" put in place by the federal government that make the process of transferring food from farm to food bank long and complex. They ask for the government's assistance in expediting this process during the pandemic.

“This is an opportunity for USDA to act quickly to produce a win for food banks and a win for farmers,” the letter reads.

Currently, many food banks utilize USDA implemented “farm to food bank” projects through The Emergency Food Assistance Program ([TEFAP](#)) which allows them to acquire produce at no cost. However, in the face of rising demand, these programs are beginning to fall short.

On April 17, the USDA announced the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program ([CFAP](#)), which is designed to ease some of the economic pressure on farmers and food banks by allocating additional funds to offset agricultural losses and help fund a response to increased food demand.

A local food bank’s response to COVID-19

<https://youtu.be/ZWb88rUvhcU>

The Jacobs and Cushman San Diego Food Bank is one such food bank affected by the program. Jim Floros, the food bank’s current CEO, said that last year the organization bought approximately 165 million pounds of fresh produce at 13 cents per pound to feed nearly 350,000 people every month. Since the crisis hit, that number is now closer to 600,000 people per month.

“About two weeks ago we placed a million dollar food order, we’re working on our second million dollar food order and probably a third one is not far from that,” Floros said. “That is not something we have ever done.”

Despite the ever-growing demand, Floros said that the food bank is rising to the challenge by gathering volunteers, adding a call center for senior citizens who need food assistance and focusing on the food bank's existing 200 distribution sites and 500 nonprofit partners to serve the San Diego community.

Floros says he is immensely proud of the work his staff at the food bank has done in response to COVID-19, and grateful for the years of preparation the food bank has had to succeed in the face of crises like this one.

"Build a ship that can weather the storm. I think we didn't realize how handy that was going to be," Floros said.