

Covid-19 Farmers Market Response and Best Practices

Created in partnership by NCAT, CFAC, AERO, and the Montana Department of Agriculture

This tip sheet has been created to provide best practices and recommendations to Montana farmers market operators and vendors in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This tip sheet draws heavily from [Farmers Market Coalition](#) and [California Alliance of Farmers Markets](#) resources that have been created in response to COVID-19. These resources are constantly evolving, and we will do our best to update them in this ever-changing situation. Please check out the [live document](#) for real time information for Montana Farmers Markets.

Where to Find Information about COVID-19 in Montana

To find current and fact-based information concerning COVID-19 and its impact on Montana, visit the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) Web page found at this link:

<https://dphhs.mt.gov/publichealth/cdepi/diseases/coronavirusmt>

Nina Heinzinger, Public Health Sanitarian at the MT DPHSS recommends that market managers work with their local sanitarian to find out what is currently permitted in their county. County Boards of Health are passing a number of measures to prevent the spread of the disease, some of which affect food outlets. To find contact information for local county or tribal health departments, visit this web page:

<https://dphhs.mt.gov/publichealth/FCSS/countytribalhealthdepts>

Market Best Practices

The place to start for market best practices is the recommendations put forth by Montana Department of Health and Human Services (MT-DPHHS) for essential business sanitation. This list was first distributed on March 16, 2020, and will be updated as more information is provided. Additionally, refer to this link for updated national guidance from CDC:

www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html

Recommendations for Sanitation and Safety for Essential Businesses from MT-DPHHS:

- **CLEANING:** DPHHS recommends routine cleaning of all frequently touched surfaces in the workplace and business, such as grocery cart handles, door handles, keyboards, workstations, countertops, doorknobs, etc.
- **CLEANING COMPOUNDS:** The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has a list of cleaning products effective at inactivating COVID-19, available at www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2
- **EMPLOYEES:** All workers exhibiting illness symptoms of fever, cough, shortness of breath should be separated from other workers and the public and are strongly advised to stay home until they are not sick. In addition, food workers exhibiting illness symptoms of vomiting, diarrhea, fever, fever with sore throat, jaundice, and infected skin cuts must not handle food.
- **FOOD:** There is no evidence that food produced in the United States can transmit COVID-19.
- **HANDWASHING:** Regularly wash hands, especially after contaminating them from cough, sneezes, using the toilet, etc.
- **PEOPLE:** Avoid close contact with patrons and workers (six feet or greater).
- **TOUCHING:** Avoid touching your face whenever possible, especially with contaminated hands.

Social Distancing Requirements for Essential Businesses

Along with the recommendations from MT-DPHHS for safety and sanitation, “essential businesses” must adhere to social distancing requirements expressed in the Governor’s Stay at Home directive. Any farmers market that is operating during the COVID-19 pandemic must take proactive measures to ensure compliance with “social distancing” requirements, including where possible:

- Designate six-foot distances. Designate with signage, tape, or by other means six-foot spacing for employees and customers in line to maintain appropriate distance;
- Provide hand sanitizer and sanitizing products. Have hand sanitizer and sanitizing products readily available for employees and customers;
- Offer and implement separate operating hours for elderly and vulnerable customers;
- Offer online and remote access. Post online whether a facility is open and how best to reach the facility and continue services by phone or remotely.

Market Set Up

Note: See Vendor Best Practice suggestions in Appendix 1.

Though Montana DPHHS has not released specific recommendations for farmers markets, below is a list of examples of market set-up best practices that can help adhere to social-distancing requirements.

1. Space booths to increase social distancing among patrons in line and walking about the market.

- Increase space between vendor booths (3 to 10 feet, depending on available space)
 - If space does not currently exist, market may need to consider temporarily eliminating vendors, including crafts, hot food, or other non-agricultural; or rotating vendors week to week.
- Chalk out / use cones / caution tape / rope / ribbon to demarcate lines in 6-foot increments—especially for vendors with high traffic—that indicate where customers should wait to be served and to pay.
- Post prominent signage for vendors’ booths, indicating where customers wait to get their order taken and where they wait to pay.



Photo: CA Alliance of Farmers Market



Photo: Poche Family Farms in New Orleans

2. Encourage the use of additional tables between customers and vendors to create more space for social distancing;



This vendor from Minnesota uses additional tables to ensure six feet is kept between him and his customers. Photo: MN Farmers Market Association



Photo: NCAT; Davis Farmers Market

3. Ensure that social distancing of six feet per person for non-family members is maintained and make clear that family members [and households] can participate in activities together, stand in line together, etc.

- Post prominent signage throughout the market asking customers to observe social distancing of six feet.
- Create directional “lanes” in the center aisle of the market to control flow of traffic.
- Provide trained greeters (volunteers or staff who are well and not in a high-risk group) at most frequently used market entrances, asking people to social distance at least six feet. Greeters might also pass out flyers or point to large signs that say something like this image below:



Photos: Debbie Roos, NC Cooperative Extension



4. Limit the number of customers at any given time as necessary to reduce outdoor/ indoor crowding and lines, to meet social distancing guidance.

- Use caution tape/rope/ribbon or other method to block off entrances that market does not wish customers to use (also hang signage indicating where customer may enter).
- Conduct crowd counts at least every 30 minutes.
- Set threshold not-to-exceed for markets, depending on space and narrowness of aisle.
- If crowd counts reach set threshold:
 - Use staff/volunteers to begin queue at market entrance and use chalked lines demarcated for customers waiting to enter that indicate where customers should wait in 6-foot increments OR
 - Move the info booth to the entrance and put people’s names and numbers on a list (like a host in a restaurant). Text customer when it’s their turn to enter.
 - Include handwashing/ sanitizing stations in the market entry locations.

5. Increase cleaning and sanitizing frequency of tables, devices, restrooms, and other high-contact areas.

- Sanitize high-touch areas frequently (at least hourly).
- Exchange tokens for SNAP and Double SNAP Dollars in one-use compostable container (such as a cup or strawberry basket) to mitigate handling; have tokens pre-counted in \$5 increments to decrease handling.
- Utilize disposable plastic wrap to cover EBT machine for each customer transactions OR
- Disinfect EBT machine between customers.
- Have porta-potties delivered onsite every week. Include one for a vendor-only restroom and keep it locked, sharing the combination with vendors only.
- For porta-potties or indoor restrooms, wipe down handles/knobs inside and outside frequently; wipe down faucet frequently; wipe down any other high-touch surface frequently.
- Remind vendors to wipe down their tables and other equipment, including point-of-sales systems, with sanitizing wipes before and after each market day, or more frequently if possible.
- Back at the office for any after-market activities, initiate a building entry protocol including hand washing before and after leaving and wiping down surfaces/equipment with disinfectant wipes before and after using them.



Photo: Farmers Market Coalition



Photo: CA Alliance of Farmers Markets

6. Train employees and vendors on best hygiene practices, including washing their hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

- Require all market staff and volunteers to watch training videos on:
 - [Proper hand washing + Video \(CDC\)](#)
 - [Proper Hand Washing + visual instructions \(WHO\)](#)
 - [Proper glove use \(WHO\)](#)
 - [If using masks, proper mask use \(WHO\)](#)
- Staff wear disposable food-grade gloves and change frequently.
- Provide employees and market vendors best hygiene practices in written form (email).
- Ask employees to wash hands at least hourly, but as often as needed and especially before and after any cash/token handling.
- Each vendor is required to bring their own hand washing station.
- Additional handwashing station should be available to the public, as is hand sanitizer.
- Hang prominent signage throughout the market, asking customers to practice CDC best hygiene practices for reducing infection, including handwashing signage. Download from the CDC website, or create your own!



Photos: NCAT

7. Offer additional hand washing or sanitizing stations throughout the venue.

- Provide additional handwashing station(s) available to the public, in addition to hand sanitizer. This is especially important at the market entry.
 - A handsless wash station is the best practice, but these can be expensive to rent and may not be available now.
 - A low-cost plastic container, pump soap, paper towel holder, and catch bucket will do the trick.
- Encourage vendors to also provide hand sanitizer for their staff and customers.



Photo: CA Alliance of Farmers Markets



An easy low cost handwashing station. Pro-tip: Use a paper towel to turn the spigot on and off if you are unable to find or rent a handless hand wash stations.

Photo: Alexandria Farmers Market

8. Eliminate events/marketing that target individuals that the DPHSS has identified as higher risk of serious illness for COVID-19.

- All market communications encourage those in high-risk groups to send another family/household member or neighbor to shop for them.
- Consider special shopping hours for high-risk groups.

9. Encourage activities such as pre-bagging to expedite purchasing.

- Encourage or require vendors to control all produce and select and bag for customers
- Encourage or require vendors to pre-bag (prior to market opening) any product they can (e.g., greens)
- Eliminate any self-serve utensils, such as tongs.



Photo: NCAT



Photo: CA Alliance of Farmers Markets

10. Suspend sampling activities until further notice.

11. Eliminate non-essential/non-related services, such as bands or other entertainment.

- Cancel or postpone all non-essential activities, including cooking demos, music, and special events adjacent to or inside the market
- Eliminate cafe area, including tables and chairs for dining
- Pare down market info booth to essentials, including EBT/Market Match processing and bags only

12. Continue to utilize local food recovery systems at the end of the market, to feed/donate extra products to populations in need.

- Coordinate with your local food bank or gleaning program if you do not already.

Alternative Marketing Methods

Even with Governor Bullock's decree that markets are essential services, some markets may want to explore other options for food distribution, based on the wishes of their vendors, board members, and community.

This section describes some alternative distribution methods:

Curbside Markets:

Several markets started curbside marketplaces before the pandemic, to respond to the increased use of curbside pick-up options at big box stores. Some examples of markets doing this in response to the pandemic include these:

- CitySeed in New Haven, Connecticut, has switched to a pre-order, drive-thru market in response to the pandemic. They have mandated that customers pay in advance, except for SNAP payments, which are made in person. For more information on their pre-order system, see the CitySeed directions here: <https://cityseed.org/things-you-should-know-about-our-pre-order-market>
- The Minnesota Farmers Market Association has been using [Local Line](#) for the past year to manage on-line ordering for nine farmers markets in Minnesota. The Rochester, Minnesota Farmers Markets piloted the online store this winter. Their original vision was to sell from the market online to schools, hospitals, and other institutions through the sales platform. They switched in light of the pandemic to promote the platform as a "drive-thru market" option for those individuals who would like to pre-order and pay for what they want to pick up locally. Orders can be picked up at the market without customers having to leave their cars. Online orders need to be made by Wednesday prior to the market at 8:00 pm for pickup on market Saturdays. You can check out their platform at www.localline.ca/rochester-farmers-markets

Local Line's goal is to help food suppliers do direct marketing – to sell their products online, access new markets, and keep organized. Local Line has published a farmers' guide to COVID-19, which can be found at [The Direct Market Farmers Guide to COVID-19.pdf](#)

It is important to keep in mind with these curbside options that SNAP customers must be present to process SNAP payments. See above for market best practices for processing SNAP payments.

Farm-Direct Options:

If your market and community decide that it is best to not operate the market until social distancing restrictions are lifted, you may want to encourage your vendors to try to do some of their own online sales or pop-up markets.

Despite the decree that markets are essential services, the Bozeman Winter Market has decided to discontinue its market for the time being, based on its location and the number of COVID-19 cases in Gallatin County. The market worked with its farmers, ranchers, and producers to make sure that their customers can still get local farm and food products. Some vendors offer home delivery, while others are hosting farm stands. Others are shipping their products and still others are working together to coordinate drop-off locations. The market put all of that information in a [Local Food Resource Guide](#) that is updated in real time.

The Cornell Small Farms Program developed a guide for farmers who want to sell their products through online platforms. It outlines different online sales platforms and provides tips for farmers who are new to this type of marketing strategy. <https://smallfarms.cornell.edu/2019/07/selling-real-farm-products-in-a-virtual-marketplace>

If vendors have an interest in providing their produce to SNAP recipients, they will need to become SNAP authorized. This is a longer process, but they can get an overview of this process in [How to Accept SNAP Payments: A Guide for Montana CSA Farms](#).

Conclusion

It is likely that Covid 19 will continue to impact Montana Farmers Markets through the rest of this summer, and perhaps into the 2021 growing season. This document is intended to provide market managers and vendors on best practices for food safety and social distancing during the pandemic. Continue to refer to the [Montana Covid-19 live document](#) for frequently updated information.

Appendix 1: Vendor Food Safety Best Practices

Regardless of which marketing platform farmers and vendors are using, it is important to remind them to use food safety best practices that help prevent disease and illness. Most farmers already have food safety protocols in place and this isn't new to any farmer in Montana, thanks to guidance from the Montana Department of Agriculture Produce Safety Coordinators and many service providers, but extra precautions are necessary with the contagious nature of Covid 19.

Epidemiologists with the CDC do not see any evidence of transmission of the Coronavirus through food or food packaging. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and prevention (CDC) provides clear guidance in both [English](#) and [Spanish](#) about preventing infection. They also provide a number of [printable factsheets](#) and posters in English and Spanish, suitable for use in the workplace.

(Download at www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/factsheets.html)

Best Practices: Packaging, tools, equipment, and facilities

Note: This is borrowed heavily from CSU's COVID-19 Farmer Guidance document – see reference below

- Regularly clean and sanitize employee break areas and all surfaces that employees touch (door knobs, handles, keyboards, touch screens). See CDC recommendations.
- Regularly clean and sanitize supplies and equipment:
 - For surfaces that will be in contact with food or food products (such as produce bins, coolers, boxes, tools), use detergents and sanitizing solutions that are food safe.
<https://producesafetyalliance.cornell.edu/sites/producesafetyalliance.cornell.edu/files/shared/documents/PSA-Labeled-Sanitizers-for-Produce.xlsx>
- To clean and sanitize surfaces that will not come into contact with food or food products (such as chairs, tables, truck beds):
 - Wear disposable gloves when cleaning and sanitizing surfaces.
 - Clean the surface with a detergent (for example, dish detergent) and rinse thoroughly.
 - Use a product that the EPA has approved for use against viruses and other emerging pathogens, see information here: www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-03/documents/sars-cov-2-list_03-03-2020.pdf.

Key take-aways:

- Improve your farm's hygiene and sanitation programs by making them more frequent and in-depth.
- Have ill employees stay at home.
- Keep high-touch surfaces clean and sanitized.
- Reduce numbers of customers at points of sale at any one time.
- Stay informed and responsive by checking updates on the CDC, CDPHE, and local public health websites.

Best Practices: Food handling and customer communication and management

- Let your customers know that you have stringent hygiene practices in place (post notices on your website and at point-of-sale areas such as your farm stand and CSA pickup site(s)).
- Reduce the amount of contact consumers have with food products.
- Consider having employees use disposable gloves for all produce bagging and boxing.
- Pre-bag produce and pre-box CSA shares. Ensure that all food contact surfaces have been cleaned and sanitized at least daily (see above guidance).
- Reduce crowding at your point-of-sale areas by:
 - Clearly designating browsing and sales areas.
 - Restricting visitor/customer access areas.
 - Extending sales hours to accommodate more customers without crowding.
 - Implementing current recommendations that encourage social distancing of six feet or more and limit gathering to no more than 10 individuals.
 - Increasing frequency of cleaning and sanitizing around customer access areas.
 - Posting signage:
 - Remind customers who are ill, or who believe themselves to be ill, to avoid coming to your farm stand, or your pick-up or drop-off site, for public health and safety.
 - Post signage for vendors and delivery services that warns them not to enter if they are sick or not feeling well, have recently traveled outside of the United States, or may have come into contact with someone with COVID-19.
 - Examples of signage:
www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/COVID-19-CoronavirusAnnouncementforVisitors.pdf
and
<https://paltc.org/sites/default/files/Attention%20Visitors%20All%20facilities.pdf>

Farm Workers

Most small farms in Montana do not hire seasonal employees, but if you do or plan to, it is more important than ever to educate them on your own farm's food safety protocols, as well as special precautions with the pandemic.

The Cornell Agriculture Workforce Center has developed guidance for farm employers.

<http://agworkforce.cals.cornell.edu/2020/03/12/novel-coronavirus-prevention-control-for-farms>

Case Study from Full Belly Farm

Excerpted from *The Real Organic Project Covid-19 Farmer Response Profiles*

Farmers markets have been deemed an essential activity in California. Here at Full Belly, we are continuing to plant, tend, and market our crops to an urban population dependent on the continuation of our supply chain. Yesterday I went to a farmers market in Palo Alto. My sons did the same on Tuesday in Berkeley, and a partner was in Marin on Thursday. We took precautions, created a distance between ourselves and our patrons, set up the stand differently, used plenty of hand sanitizer (a lavender product with 80% alcohol made by a neighboring farm). We had one person handling money and credit cards, wearing gloves and spraying the hand sanitizer regularly on hands... a protocol for minimizing risk from Covid 19.

Patrons pointed at our products that they didn't touch, we collected, bagged and totaled their purchases, or we put those items on a table where they were able to place things in their own bags. The table acted as a barrier between our customers and our farm crew. Social distancing was encouraged. There were none of the regular hugs that are often requested by some of our friends—not even a fist bump or elbow. We were taking the best precautions to be safe and responsible to them and to the farm where we would be returning.

References

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