



House Committee on Agriculture and Land Use
Oregon State Capitol
900 Court Street NE
Salem, Oregon 97301

May 25, 2020

Chair Clem and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity for the farm to school community to provide an overview of how the Farm to School program has been impacted by COVID-19.

The most significant change to school meals, which has impacted farm to school, is that because schools are serving meals remotely or on site for take-away rather than sit down, all meals are now grab-n-go and most are cold meals. The thirty school districts who responded to our survey about their challenges and needs indicated a high need for minimally processed, pre-packaged grab-and-go food items, and cold items, in particular fruits and vegetables. The availability of these types of minimally and packaged processed products is currently limited. School food service staff are also overwhelmed by the new meal service structure and have decreased capacity to work with local producers.

This was already a difficult time of year for farm to school purchasing because fresh produce options are limited in March-May. Schools are also dealing with significant budget deficits as they are providing meals without any paying students.

In addition, some of the school districts participating in the ODE Farm to School Procurement Grant program have spent all of their funds for reimbursement of purchases of Oregon foods, and are hoping for additional funding from ODE's Competitive Procurement Grant. Others had been spending grant funds, but are now challenged to do so. And others are new to the program and haven't begun making purchases yet. If sponsors aren't able to spend their funds, our understanding is that those funds will be allocated to those who can.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented increased challenges for producers to access the school market. COVID-19 has created an increased demand for minimally processed and pre-packaged products and the farm to school producers do not generally have adequate processing and packaging infrastructure to meet this demand and school districts have not

had capacity to process products themselves. And as mentioned above, school food service staff also have decreased capacity to work with local producers. The ODE Producer Equipment and Infrastructure Grants, soon to be awarded, are more important than ever, so that producers can provide the products, including processed products, that schools need. The impacts of COVID are ongoing so even summer and fall markets will be disrupted.

Both schools and producers need technical assistance, training and resources to navigate these challenges. For example, OFSSGN and state agency partners have compiled a product availability list that fits schools' needs, which was shared with schools to facilitate purchasing. Funding is available from ODE's Farm to School Technical Assistance Grants for this type of technical assistance and resources.

I'd like to share some stories to give you a sense of what producers and school districts are experiencing during this unprecedented time, both in terms of the challenges they are facing and what's been possible.

Producer stories

Randy Kiyokawa , Kiyokawa Orchards, who grows orchard crops, wrote:

“Our sales to schools completely stopped once the schools were closed but it normally slows down in March anyways.”

Jeff Aichele, Aichele Farms, who has sold a lot of strawberries to schools in the past, wrote:

“I'm not sure I have much to say in regards to the impact. We haven't started our season yet. I know there will be changes at our markets but I'm not sure how the farm to school process is going to work out. I may have some more info this week though.”

Roadrunner Pizza, an Oregon-processed pizza company, had not been able to sell through their distributor because of lack of product movement, (because most schools couldn't use hot products), but they are now selling direct to schools.

Bliss Nut Butters and Straw Propeller Gourmet Foods both have grab and go products available but the schools haven't contacted them.

Salsa Locas has sold tamales and/or chips to Hillsboro, Beaverton, Portland and Umatilla school districts. Centennial School District was interested but wasn't able to purchase. Portland Public School purchased 6,000 one ounce chip bags.

Keith, with Better Bean Company wrote to ODA:

“Portland Public Schools ordered a pallet (6000 2.5 ounce single serve cups) of our OG Cuban Black Beans. They will pass out in their lunch kits as a protein option. Each cup has 4gr protein. Hopefully the kids will like them enough that they reorder. This is just the first order. I cannot thank you enough for creating this opportunity. “

School districts stories

The situation is different in every district. Most districts are struggling with farm to school purchases, but there are some success stories, which I thought I'd share, along with the challenges.

Whitey Ellersick, with Portland Public Schools wrote: “we are serving beans today from the Better Bean Company which said they use local beans and serving Lola's yakisoba [Umi Organic] next week. So slow moving but still trying to support local. ... I do not have [any more] funds to support [local purchases] - while we are feeding kids, the revenue from reimbursement does not cover our costs while paying all employees regardless. Our funds will be depleted and our ability to purchase the same quality of food we have done in the past may not be possible, and therefore, my ability to support local may be less than before.”

Rachel Petit with Food Roots wrote:

“As OFSSGN Procurement Hub Lead for the North Coast, I've worked with Sandy Porter, Nestucca Valley School District, to help her source local products for the district's weekly meal delivery to families. So far she's purchased 160 pounds of ground beef and 108 pounds of salad mix, over \$1500. She's used the ground beef in chili and other meals, sent it out for delivery cold with reheating instructions and included a label with the local farm information. This is the first school district procurement of Tillamook county products we've helped coordinate... They've used their ODE Procurement grant funds for these purchases, and are planning to continue sourcing county-grown products on an as-desired basis for the rest of this school year, and for standard food service next year.”

Rikkilyn Starliper, Umatilla School District wrote:

“Finding pre-packaged veggies including carrots has been a challenge from time to time. We are continuing to package those to complete the meal pattern.”

Umatilla School District has purchased and served tamales from Salsas Locas.

Chris Panike, LaGrande School District, wrote to Nell Mae's Farm:

“Good to see you yesterday and looking forward to your visit in the morning. Sounds like we can handle all your available crop, so bring us everything you need to move, we will distribute to our students. Excellent way to put the somewhat dormant Farm to School funds to work! Hopefully this will help you get you over the hump and the restaurant demand will return.”

Sheila Foster, with Rogue Valley Farm to School shared this success story:

“In response to the need of both farmers and families, Rogue Valley Farm to School (RVF2S) and Fry Family Farm partnered to participate in the USDA funded Farmers to Families Food Box Program. Through this program, Fry Family Farm and RVF2S, with the help of Organically Grown Company (OGC), are working together to source produce from producers throughout Oregon, particularly those whose sales have been negatively impacted by the

COVID-19 pandemic. RVF2S was able to hire nine new staff to help pack and 2,000 boxes of organic fruits and vegetables, to *distribute to families picking up lunches at local schools every week*. The program has been a tremendous success, helping farmers when they need it, feeding families who are hungry, and providing jobs when unemployment is at record levels. It has been amazing to see the joy of all the people--farmers, RVF2S staff, community volunteers, families and school food service staff, all working together to get food to families. Families have responded by sending recipes of what they have prepared and many stories. It has been a wonderfully direct way of increasing access to healthy, fresh, locally grown, organic food for families for whom this quality of produce is usually out of reach. We plan to continue the program for six to 12 weeks, or until December as funding allows. Currently the program involves infusing *nearly a million dollars into the farming community* and distributing nearly 240,000 lbs of fresh organic produce to families in need using the network of the school lunch program. Funding from the ODE Farm to School Education Grants is providing educational activities and recipes to include in the box. All of this is possible because of relationships built through the Farm to School Program.”

Thank you for your interest in the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Oregon’s farm to school efforts! Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Megan Kemple". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Megan Kemple, Director
541-344-4329 (home office)
megan@oregonfarmtoschool.org
www.oregonfarmtoschool.org