



Memorandum

TO: SATPAL SIDHU, COUNTY EXECUTIVE

FROM: Riley Sweeney, Chair - Whatcom County Food System Committee

DATE: 2/25/2021

RE: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS BY WHATCOM COUNTY FOOD SYSTEM COMMITTEE ON PROTECTING THE FOOD SYSTEM.

Last year, the Whatcom County Food System Committee delivered a letter to the County Council and County Executive spelling out clear recommendations for protecting our food system during this pandemic.

Our letter came at a time in which outbreaks at congregate work settings in Yakima County had caused a dramatic uptick in COVID cases, and our farms, grocers and consumers struggled to cope with the economic impacts of the virus.

With the growing season rapidly approaching, our food system is uniquely vulnerable to the aftershocks of this virus. One bad season is common in agriculture, but another could be devastating.

We strongly urge the council to take action by implementing the recommendations below.

We cannot let this moment pass without action. All the recommendations below are County-specific steps that can be taken to ensure the health and economic security of our food system.

The Whatcom Food System Committee stands ready to speak directly to council on these recommendations as needed.

We recommend the Council take the following steps:

1. Protect the health and safety of workers across the food system:
 - a. Utilize the lessons learned from the Yakima outbreaks to implement immediate, strict and aggressive safety measures at congregate work facilities before this agricultural season is in full swing.
 - 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 order, 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 federal 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 to fund 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.
4. Increase access to healthy and local food for people dealing with economic hardship created by the pandemic:
 - a. Support state and federal policies that ensure access to food assistance during this pandemic. The numbers of people who are food insecure in Whatcom County are predicted to continue the current upward trajectory, especially as short-term COVID benefits disappear. Meeting the future anticipated levels of food security in our County will require committed planning and funding.

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.

Thank you for your consideration.

Signed,
The Whatcom County Food System Committee