

## **Research Update: COVID-19 and Marketing Challenges for Food Producers in Louisiana**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the operations of many farm and food businesses across Louisiana. Producers had to adapt to changes or closures of market outlets, including farmers markets, farm-to-school programs, and restaurants. Using data collected from an online survey, this research examines pre- and post-pandemic marketing channels and challenges faced by food producers.

**Keywords:** food producers, local food systems, Louisiana, online survey, pandemic

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## **Introduction**

The recent pandemic stressed local food systems. Despite the focus given to the challenges faced at each segment of the food supply chain, the pandemic allowed for re-examining strengths and weaknesses of local and regional food systems and assessing their adaptability. Shorter supply chains and economic synergies at the local and regional levels, trust between consumers and local farmers, and producer responses to challenges faced by the pandemic were some areas that received attention. Considering the variations of local food systems by locale, case studies by state or industry provide additional insight.

In Louisiana, market uncertainty and new safety protocols caused broader shocks to the local food system throughout the state. This was coupled with national seed shortages, panic buying, and reduced operations at critical processing plants. Farm operations had to adapt, with many producers relying on online platforms to sell their products, development of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operations, and partnerships with local institutions, food banks, and pantries.

## **Objective**

This research examines changes in market channels pre- and post-pandemic, marketing challenges, and assistance needed by Louisiana food producers.

## **Methodology**

An online survey was administered in October 2020, about six months into the pandemic. The 25-item questionnaire collected information on farm production, market channels, and marketing challenges. A total of 124 complete responses were collected and analyzed.

## **Findings**

The highest response rate came from the South and Central regions of Louisiana (76%)—areas with more established local food systems and smaller farm operations focusing predominately on vegetable and fruit production. Findings reveal marketing challenges throughout the state, with 34% of the respondents requiring marketing assistance and 8% software or technology support. The top two marketing channels were direct sales and wholesale (81%, 45% responses) pre-COVID. The producers selling through direct marketing (highest value sales channel) reported mixed effects 6 months post-COVID; the ones experiencing increased sales switched to online marketing and to CSAs. Thirty-five percent saw loss in weekly sales up to \$1,000, and 15% reported no change in sales.