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Cornhusker Economics

Buy Fresh Buy Local Nebraska Working Together for Local Food



Direct market farms in Nebraska are made up of people passionate about raising good food for their fellow Nebraskans. They grow vegetables, fruits, meat, grains, and value-added products to sell directly to consumers in their communities.

During the pandemic, these small farms have experienced restaurant sales vanishing, farmers' market attendance decreasing, and slots filling up at the small meat processors where they take their livestock. At the same time, there has been a renewed interest from consumers seeking reliable, transparent food produced close to home. It's been a volatile year, and it has required quick pivoting, group coordination and action to survive as a business.

Small farms have committed customers and the agility to withstand turbulence

The small size of many direct market farms has been a boon, as they have been able to make quick adjustments to their businesses by venturing into online sales, home delivery, shipping, and collaboration with other businesses. When your goal is not to feed the world, but to feed your immediate community, you are small and agile enough to adapt your business to change.

The relationship between farm and customer has also provided stability in an unstable time. One distinction of small, local food farms is that they are accessible to consumers. Customers can look the person who raised their

pork in their eyes and consider them a friend. They can visit the farm where their salad comes from, and they can form a connection to the land that is often absent in our culture.

It takes time to connect directly with customers, often years of farmers' market vending, hosting farm tours, and one-on-one conversations.

Among the many benefits of these relationships is the culture of care that



runs through the local food community. Throughout the pandemic customers have shown up for their local farms by ordering online, picking up curbside orders at farmers' markets, getting beef bundles shipped to their homes, and signing up for community supported agriculture (CSA) shares and farm subscriptions.

Stratton farm finds new market through collaboration

Buy Fresh Buy Local Nebraska member [Heritage Acres](#) of Stratton, NE has used their strong connections to customers and their ability to change quickly to transform their farm business this year. Paula and Chris Sandberg, owners of Heritage Acres, had been marketing their grass-fed beef directly to consumers for the past 5 years.

During the spring of 2020, when the food supply chain slowed significantly, many shoppers turned to local farmers and ranchers for produce, eggs, grains, and meat and by mid-May Heritage Acres was sold out of beef for the entire year.

Though they still had fresh eggs and pork available, Paula saw this moment as a time to expand their offerings. She thought other local farms could benefit from an online ordering system, and customers could benefit by finding a wide diversity of local food on one site.

By mid-summer, the Heritage Acres online sales platform offered products from ten local food businesses. Fresh lettuce, mushrooms, poultry, Aronia berries, microgreens, locally roasted coffee, heritage wheat, pork, beef, and eggs are just some of the products Heritage Acres have offered in the online store this past year. Customers order online and pick up their orders at a weekly “drive-through” farmers’ market.

The drive-through market arose from the pandemic, but the concept is here to stay. Because of the program’s success, Paula, and the farms she works with, will continue to aggregate products and expand their 2021 delivery and pickup options in Southwest Nebraska.

Buy Fresh Buy Local Nebraska - Increasing the demand for local food

Banding together in a collective marketing program like [Buy Fresh Buy Local Nebraska](#) (BFBLN) is another example of working together to promote a movement where many benefit. In a nutshell, BFBLN promotes the consumption of local food so that farms have stable markets, and communities have access to healthy, fresh food.

BFBLN is the go-to resource in the state to find local food producers. Consumers, restaurants, grocery stores and institutions use BFBLN resources to source local ingredients and plug into their community’s local food scene.

Pooling resources for the benefit of many small farms and local food businesses



BFBLN has been hosted by the UNL Nebraska Cooperative Development Center (NCDC) in the Agricultural Economics Department since its inception fifteen years ago. BFBLN is made up of members – direct-market farms, ranches, restaurants, farmers’ markets, grocery stores and friends of local food.

Members form a network of businesses that are committed to expanding the market for local

food in Nebraska. They recognize that, in the words of botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, “All flourishing is mutual.” Most farms selling directly to customers don’t have large marketing budgets. Joining Buy Fresh Buy Local Nebraska allows small farms to pool resources and take part in a large-scale marketing campaign to reach more customers.

In 2020 BFBLN had over 100 members across the state and reached hundreds of thousands of Nebraskans through its marketing campaigns and publications.

The Nebraska Food Guide connects eaters with local farmers

BFBLN membership fees fund the design and printing of the annual [Nebraska Food Guide](#), a publication that has helped Nebraskans source locally grown and raised goods for 15 years. [The Nebraska Food Guide](#) connects eaters to local food producers through a directory listing of all BFBLN members.

In addition to being a directory, it educates and inspires with seasonal recipes, farm-to-fork stories, a statewide map of local food businesses, and resources for living and eating locally.

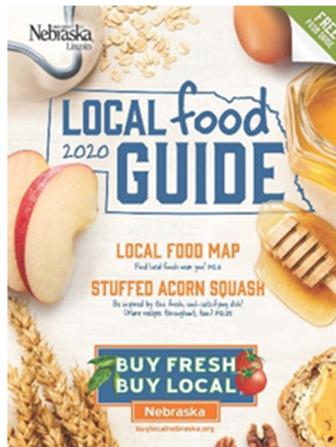
Inspiring Nebraskans to eat local!

Just like so many of its members, BFBLN has also adapted and pivoted in 2020 to meet the world where it is. In past years, the program would travel the state “boothing” at farmers’ markets, hosting local food celebrations, and offering farm tours to the public. In 2020, due to pandemic related travel restrictions, BFBLN shifted their focus from in-person events to expanding publications, upping virtual accessibility, and doing all we can to assist our members in a safe way.

Here are a few examples from 2020 of ways that BFBLN has grown to meet changing needs:

- [Online Food Guide](#)

Our searchable [online food guide](#) debuted in 2020 and helps consumers easily find local ingredients. Users can search our member database by region, method of sale, category, or specific product.



- [Holiday Food Guide](#)



Winter sales can add a boost to the cash flow of local food farms. The year 2020 marked the first edition of [BFBLN's Holiday Gift Guide](#). It featured 16 unique, locally grown products perfect for gifts, or winter meals.

With thousands of reads, the popularity of this publication has translated into sales of the featured products and an increased public awareness that local food can be found all year round in Nebraska.

- [Go to Grow Campaign](#)



In partnership with Nebraska Extension and the Center for Rural Affairs, Buy Fresh Buy Local Nebraska has worked to launch a statewide media campaign called '[Go to Grow](#)'. It seeks to raise public awareness of and interest in rural farmers' markets.

This campaign has reached hundreds of thousands of people across the state through advertisements in print and digital newspapers as well as social media.

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