

# Virus outbreak shows value of buying directly from farms

As the world and food supply chain wrestles with the COVID-19 pandemic, farmers that sell directly to consumers are proving the value of shopping local.

Many of those farms are going out of their way to keep their customers supplied and safe.

Some are offering doorstep delivery; others are increasing the frequency of their normally scheduled drop-offs. Consumers are being directed to websites for ordering and given options to keep contact minimal during on-farm pick-ups.

At Sedge Wood Farms near Cornell, purchasers are invited to come out to "340 acres of fresh air" on the farm and stand by at a safe distance while their purchases are put into their trunk, meaning minimal close contact, said Ashly Steinke. Sedge Wood Farms is also following all the same disinfecting procedures that other stores are and offering doorstep delivery.

Leslie Svacina of Cylon Rolling Acres near Deer Park said that they rolled out their new e-commerce site that they had been planning to launch in April a few weeks early to make ordering easier for their customers. They're also having customers call ahead for orders for pick-up, so that they can be set aside for customers beforehand to minimize contact.

They're doing whatever they can, including offering specials, to make it easier for their customers who have plenty of other concerns beyond eating to deal with, Svacina said.

Still, Steinke said the level of demand currently being experienced at every farm is different.

Other than a urgent request to supply meat to restock an Eau Claire co-op that had cleared its coolers and orders from three families who purchased beef by the case, business was actually a little slow at Sedge Wood Farms, which sells grass-fed beef to the co-op, a few restaurants and directly to consumers from the farm, Steinke said, noting that only one of the restaurants they supply is still open and offering takeout.

Many other farmers, though, are seeing sales take off, causing some to run out of stock.

At Cylon Rolling Acres, which specializes in goat meat, they've seen an increase in both orders and new customers, owner Leslie Svacina said. Whether that's a direct result of COVID-19, it's hard to know for sure, she said, but the timing lines up.

But due to the specialty nature of goat meat, Svacina didn't expect sales to skyrocket as much as they are likely to for pork, beef and poultry, something she knows that's happening for many other farmers in her peer group.

For now, though, neither Steinke nor Svacina is immediately anticipating running out.

That might depend on how long Gov. Tony Evers' "safer at home" order continues, however, Svacina said. While she thought the farm would be okay with the amount of stock they had and planned butchering, there is a possibility that they could run out earlier than anticipated.

Sedge Wood Farms processes 30-35 finished, grass-fed steers each year,

out of about 100 total animals. Even if business surges and they happen to run out of stock, butchering and processing season is starting in mid-April, Steinke said, and they'd be restocked by May 1.

For farms not benefiting as much from an uptick in business, Steinke said, two factors might be to blame: price and convenience.

Grocery stores often sell products below many smaller farms' breakeven point, which can lead to "sticker shock" when people look to make the switch between providers, Steinke said. Also, for farms that offer pick-up, some customers may prefer to instead go to a store where they can buy more than just beef (or whichever product is being sold at the farm) there.

For those who are in the process of making the choice to buy direct from farms, it's important "to help customers understand the cost of production," Svacina said.

But perhaps the best selling point for farmers looking to direct market is community.

Care for their customers is why many farms are putting in that extra effort to do everything they can to keep them supplied and safe at the same time.

Svacina said she's just grateful to be able to continue working and providing food for the community.

The need for communities to come together at times like these is why Steinke said he wasn't imposing a specific mile range on the doorstep deliveries they're offering.

Communities are capable of supporting their local farmers in turn.

Steinke encouraged people to reach out to whoever may be farming and

direct marketing in their community.

“There’s plenty of us who are direct marketing,” Steinke said, noting that those who are doing so aren’t competing with each other and are “in it together.”

Many farm organizations, local co-ops and farms themselves have created lists for those looking for a way to buy directly from and support their local agricultural community.

By the time this crisis is over, Steinke hoped that people would realize the essential value of supporting local.

Svacina said she hoped that “a lot of people are going to be doing more homework” on where their food comes from and what farming practices going into producing it.

With the attention that agriculture has gotten as an “essential business” during this crisis, Svacina said, there just might be a “silver lining” of understanding how important supporting the farming community is.