



Photo: Nathaniel Martin

Farmers' markets are a long-standing, integral part of British Columbia's local economic, social, and cultural heritage. In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic created interruptions in global food networks and shifted attention to the importance of local food markets as sources of food security. The BC Association of Farmers' Markets (BCAFM) is a membership-based organization that supports, promotes, and advocates for farmer's markets and vendors in British Columbia. The BCAFM is responsible for administering several programs and resources for members including capacity building opportunities, conferences, education, mentorship, and collaboration with other organizations. They also communicate with members about potential funding opportunities, like government grants and sponsorships.

One of their recent projects has been developing the "BC Farmers' Market Trail"; a website catered to the public to provide information about who their members markets are, what they do, and where they are located. The aim of the project is to foster community connection between the public and their local market to increase community investment in the local food system, as well as promoting the farmers' markets as tourist destinations. The BCAFM also administers the BC Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program to create equitable pathways to accessing local healthy food for low-income, seniors, pregnant people, and families.

Sustainability Goals: Building up the Triple Bottom Line

The BCAFM prioritizes a triple bottom line approach to economic, environmental and social sustainability goals. Their main goal is to "continually assert that farmers markets are a very important part of our local economic and ecosystem". BCAFM addresses that a variety of people use market spaces "for local businesses, for entrepreneurs, for farmers...[and] artists". They also conduct research to understand how public perceptions of farmers' markets can influence who is using farmers' market spaces. In particular, BCAFM focuses on engaging young people and encouraging them to utilize farmers' markets as a space for business and commerce. For example, one member market created the Fresh Finds program, which engages young entrepreneurs to test their skills in a market setting. BCAFM's goal is to support members in creating a space for markets to engage with a variety of potential businesses and customers to foster long term economic sustainability.

BCAFM's environmental goals include increasing recognition of the roles that farmers' markets can play as innovators and leaders of sustainable choices. They recognize that even temporary spaces can provide an environmental solution for businesses and consumers who want to shop locally and sustainably. BCAFM wants markets to bring visibility - and active change - to environmental concerns like plastic food packaging and waste, and provide alternative solutions that can complement community and agricultural sustainability initiatives.

BCAFM also has social sustainability goals for equity, justice, and decolonization. The organization wants to understand their own role in building sustainable markets by "understanding who's not at the table" when discussing access to local food. One important aspect of this work has been focusing within the organization to train staff on topics such as inclusivity, equity and anti-racism. BCAFM recognizes the importance of identifying and reflecting on challenges within the organization so they can align their practices with their goals, and understand how farmer's markets can be more, how we can explore decolonizing ourselves. An important step for BCAFM in this learning has been to elevate stories of Indigenous peoples and seek out partnerships with organizations like Indigenous Tourism BC.

Changes Due to COVID-19

Farmers' Markets are an Essential Service

During the COVID-19 pandemic BCAFM and its members underwent several changes. Markets and vendors were concerned with the ability to stay open and provide goods to their communities. Tess Van Den Bosch, BCAFM's Membership and Programs Lead comments, "So, pandemic declared. Markets are going: What do we do? Are we allowed to operate?" BCAFM communicated with the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) early on to ensure that farmers' markets would be able to stay open. Only food was allowed at first as an essential part of farmers' markets staying open. Upon further communication with BCCDC it was decided that non-food vendors could also sell wares in open in the markets. The decision to expand to all vendors resulted from discussions surrounding the economic importance of the other 4,000 or so vendors participating in BC markets. Each municipality and market could form additional guidelines on whether markets could stay open and under what conditions. This means some markets had a full list of vendors returning and others are still only open to food vendors.

"One of the biggest things that happened was making sure that we did get that declaration that farmer's markets are an essential service."

Facilitating a Safe Shopping Experience

One challenge for markets was around how to maintain physical distancing within the market. Each market had to work with site operators, owners of the property where the market is situated, and health officer to determine safe limits and physical distancing measures for crowds. This typically means people were waiting longer to get into the market now and are encouraged to shop efficiently to keep the flow of people moving. Another challenge to keeping markets physically open was sourcing personal protective equipment in early spring when demand was high for items like hand sanitizer. There were a lot of questions early on about "How do you ensure the safety of your vendors, and your volunteers, and your staff that are at the market? How do you [re]assure the public?" Keeping markets open required transparency on the part of the BCAFM to ensure that markets and the public knew all necessary safety precautions were being followed.



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From In-Person to Online Markets

Another way to ensure that members and vendors could continue to operate without having physical markets was to develop an online platform where consumers could shop online from their local farmer's market. Prior to the pandemic BCAFM had been considering developing an online initiative to increase engagement of young people and create broader access for all customers to market goods and services. Through the online system customers could purchase groceries and other market goods and then pick them up at the market without having to wait in market lines or crowds. Of course, every market was different and some had challenges to implementing the new system based on technology aptitude. Overall BCAFM considers the online platform to be a success for both vendors and communities who valued the online shopping option.

“Every market has its own staff, its own board. They’re not all operated the same. They don’t all have the same level of skills when it comes to social media or technology. It’s really incredible how many people picked it up. We had over 60 markets go online. And it’s just been incredible to watch them all adapt to it because it’s really demanding.”

Challenges: Market Viability, Sustainability, and Conceptualizing the Crisis

Creating new systems and adapting to multiple changes was challenging. BCAFM highlights three main challenges for dealing with COVID-19: financial viability for markets; trade-offs for environmental sustainability; and crisis communication and safety. The first challenge for markets was concern with operating revenue and staying viable during the pandemic. Although interest in locally sourced food increased due to supermarket shortages and panic buying at the beginning of the pandemic, markets were not sure this would translate to increased local purchasing. Uncertainty about being able to stay open during COVID-19 also affected markets as they would have an outlet to provide customers with local goods while demand for their products was high, despite having more restrictions in being able to sell in-person. Overall BCAFM has found the surge in demand for local food has bolstered community support for their local markets and hopes that trend continues past the pandemic. BCAFM also noted that individual markets creatively sought alternative financial resources either through grants or local credit unions to help pay for operating expenses, such as staffing.



Photo: Tess Van Den Bosch

A second challenge for BCAFM and markets was accepting trade-offs between safety and environmental sustainability goals. "Of course, there was the concern around hygiene, and food safety, and packaging, and all of these things", observed Tess. Markets and vendors had to make decisions to ensure that sanitization and hygienic standards were met, which meant more items were being packaged for customers than usual, thus creating more waste. As the pandemic progressed the excess level of packaging used by some markets and vendors was deemed unnecessary when compared to grocery stores that were not held to the same standard. Overall BCAFM had to devote more resources to make sure markets could remain in operation during COVID-19, which meant less time and money was focused on environmental sustainability goals and initiatives.



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The final challenge for BCAFM was just "wrapping our brains around crisis communications", since staff members had not experienced a pandemic before. BCAFM quickly realized the challenges that came with remote team work while also supporting members from afar. These factors included having to increase information turnaround times, as well as creating a dedicated COVID-19 webpage, to keep members and the public up to speed on the relevant orders from the Provincial Health Officer and BCCDC guidelines and information. To manage the changing information the BCAFM set up a COVID-19 AdvisoryGroup which worked closely with the BCCDC to determine how markets could operate safely through the pandemic. One difficulty in setting up guidelines was that information was subject to continual changes, so the BCAFM and their members had to quickly adjust messaging as it was received. The BCAFM predicts this will get more difficult for markets looking to plan indoor and winter markets since rules are subject to change quickly and without notice. BCAFM continues to prioritize communication between government and their members, and is committed to being transparent as new information is received their members need decision making support to continually adapt to updates.

Advice: Collaboration and Communication are Key

Through the challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, the BCAFM encourages other organizations and businesses to collaborate and keep the lines of communication open. One silver lining has been collaborating with other farmer's market organizations. For example, BCAFM has been in collaboration with Nova Scotia Farmers' Markets and now has regular meetings to discuss strategies for dealing with the pandemic and all things farmer's markets. BCAFM also continues to collaborate and communicate with the BCCDC to discuss guidelines for operators and markets. Keeping lines of communication open and conveying information quickly helps members to make sound, informed decisions during this time of uncertainty.

Reaching out to other organizations and learning from what others are doing is also an important strategy for BCAFM. They encourage other organizations to collaborate and ask questions to get ideas for strategies for working with local businesses. They also emphasize understanding that the pandemic is affecting a range of businesses in the local economy and this could provide an opportunity to foster community building and strengthening local relationships.



Photo: Tess Van Den Bosch

"Let's help each other where we can... that's what farmers' markets are about is community and so we can build a community around this too."

Written by Jamie Varney, edited by Belinda Li and Tamara Shulman. Thank you to Tess Van Den Bosch for sharing insights and experiences from the BCAFM. Photos taken by BCAFM. Revised: 2020 December 2.