

Local food producers and Farmers Markets: addressing the multiple challenges of 2019-2021 and identifying strategies for resilience:

In 2021, the University of Canberra undertook research into the impact of the multiple challenges of drought, bushfires, hail, floods and the COVID-19 pandemic on different parts of the local food system of the ACT to determine the pivotal challenges to producing and supplying local food and to identify the most useful solutions towards recovery and support. As part of this, various stakeholders comprising producer– vendors from across the region and managers from within ACT Farmers Markets were interviewed. Responses were anonymised and summarised as follows:

Natural disasters

The Black Summer bushfires affected at least 14 food producer-vendors directly, in some instances destroying homes, infrastructure and all or part of the year's crop. Some producers had already worked their way through challenges with the preceding drought. Others were indirectly impacted by heatwaves and haze from bushfires or from road closures.

The Rotary Club of Hall, supplemented by customer donations, provided timely financial, government grant seeking and counselling support to Capital Region Farmers Market (CRFM) producers directly impacted by the fires.

Donations and support also came directly from customers, and the community at large.

The emotional, social and practical aspects of the support were particularly well appreciated.

Some producers noted that the singular focus on fires highlighted uneven recognition of the impact of the range of disasters. For example, the impact of the 2017-19 drought was longer and more widespread than commonly acknowledged. This 'hidden disaster' generated substantial anxiety and financial strain.

Although some stakeholders had received financial assistance during the drought, it was difficult to account for the complexity of the costs involved.

Producers with specific breeds or production practices were more vulnerable to the financial costs of destocking and restocking than mainstream producers. In particular, producers of niche products, diversified farms practicing regenerative and organic agriculture, and older farmers, were particularly vulnerable to falling through the cracks of existing compensation and support packages.

Producers with diversified income streams were more resilient to the various economic strains presented by these various disasters.

COVID-19 Pandemic lockdown(s) and restrictions

The national lockdown (March-May 2020) occurred within eight weeks of the 2019/20 bushfires. Subsequent lockdowns in Victoria and Greater Sydney also affected some producers. The ACT experienced some reprieve until the 9 weeks of lockdown in August -November 2021.

Both CRFM and South Side Farmers Markets remained open (with a few exceptions) as Farmers Markets were classified as essential services. Despite this, financial viability of Farmers Markets was a continuing consideration to the operators. Around Australia, ability to stay open was also dependant on support from the private landowners or local government; some closures also followed positive case identification or customer non-compliance with COVID safety plans.

Universally, local producers were grateful that the Farmers Markets remained open as this is a major, in some instances sole, outlet for their produce. As well as livelihoods, this also assisted mental health via social support - from the Market community and through customers, as well as *for* customers.

Restaurant closure, cessation of tourism, loss of seasonal backpacker labour, border closure and movement restrictions were all reported by producers as being major challenges.

The CRFM drew on younger family and friends of volunteers to oversee COVID infection control measures: procedures were diligently maintained and attendance numbers were monitored (5500-6000 shoppers/week at CRFM).

Consumers were advised to restrict to one-person per household to assist with COVID prevention and control. Some farmer-vendors and market volunteers who are older, and vulnerable, stayed away. Some producers (initially) qualified for government 'Jobkeeper' payments but most did not qualify. Some producers diversified and extended their business by marketing via social media or reaching out to customers unable to come to markets via home deliveries and food box 'click and collect'. Those producers who were from NSW areas under restriction still traded if they had ACT staff or contacts who could take their produce and market it for them.

ACT lockdown (August-October 2021)

ACT border restrictions made it difficult (near impossible) for producers outside ACT to sell their produce if they did not have ACT residency or staff. Constant changes in regulations resulted in some unexpected entry refusals, despite a high proportion of Market staff time being dedicated to collecting and communicating the advice. CRFM was designated an enclosed pavilion, locking it in to certain restrictions that also created confusion for customers and difficulty for the Market operators.

Security guards were needed to manage non-compliance and frustrations. As a result of these various constraints, CRFM stall holder numbers dropped to 44 at one stage and customer numbers dropped to 1400. Much of this pressure took its toll, with a number of vendors ceasing trading permanently, and several others on the verge of closure.

Recommendations

To support local food producers of the Capital Region during periods of infection control, government needs to create policies specific to the nature of the markets and producer-vendors rather than fitting them into existing regulations, thus maintaining the pivotal role Farmers Markets play in local food supply.

Recommendations emerging from this research include:

- resolve the CRFM market being classified an enclosed pavilion
- provide a single and unambiguous centre for communication of advice from government
- develop a producer-vendor policy so that producer-vendors who are fully vaccinated, with no symptoms and who have complied with testing can enter ACT to sell their produce

The values espoused by the ACT government of local, diverse, innovative, climate resilient and environmentally sustainable food production necessitate mechanisms that provide support for local food producers across the NSW- ACT border, both generally and to prevent and respond to disasters.

Producers can enhance their own resilience to future disruptions by

- diversifying income or the products produced, where possible, to buffer against the unpredictability of future disasters;
- maintaining online communication with customers to enable quick conversion to online marketing when required.
- growing produce in the most climate resilient, fire-proof and environmentally sustainable way and communicating why this is important to consumers, market managers and government decision makers, to ensure that additional costs are acknowledged.

Conclusion

Despite the huge challenge of natural disasters (drought and bushfire in particular) the ACT Farmers Markets and almost all stallholder enterprises survived the 2019-2021 period considered in this study. This was in large part due to the support generated by and within the Farmers Markets, including with customers. The challenges that caused most stallholders to cease trading were the result of restrictions and policy that made trading at the Farmers Market's impossible, despite them staying open. This highlights the need to review such policies if the ACT wishes to access fresh food from its local, cross-border region, and to support climate resilient, environmentally sustainable local food.

Dr Ro McFarlane
food.futures@canberra.edu.au
ro.mcfarlane@canberra.edu.au
University of Canberra
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