

[COVID-19 Farmers Market Safe Operations]

Farmers markets, swap meets and produce trucks fill an important role in offering essential goods and services such as fresh produce and household consumer products to communities across the country.

These retail venues are a crucial link for many to fresh agricultural food products, but COVID-19 presents challenges to the health of employees, vendors, and customers. So, how can a market manager ensure everyone follows social distancing protocols? - and that customers can continue to have access to these essential goods and services during the COVID-19 pandemic?

We'll take a look at several best practices that can be implemented to help markets operate safely and provide tips and checklists from farmers markets that have already made successful shifts in their operation.

[Operational Challenges & Solutions]

To tell us more about the challenges and about practical solutions related to COVID-19 is Michele DiMaggio, a Retail Food Supervisor in Contra Costa County, CA and Region 2 Vice President for the National Environmental Health Association, representing EH professionals in California, Arizona and Nevada.

Hi, Michele, thanks for joining us to talk about the impact of COVID-19 on farmers market operations. It's good to have you.

I have some questions for you and the first one, I think is a good starting point for this conversation:

Are farmers markets considered an essential business?

Yes, in California and I believe in most U.S. states, farmers markets are considered an essential business because they provide the public with healthy and essential agricultural food products.

Got it, that's good to know -so are farmers markets required to follow social distancing protocols?

Yes, in Contra Costa County, where I work and live, and anywhere it's mandated in the U.S., farmers market employees, vendors and customers must maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from each other. To reinforce this, markets should post social distancing reminder signs at each entrance, at each booth, and at handwash and restroom stations. By posting signage, market managers can repetitively remind everyone at the market.

Ok. And what can a farmers market manager do to help prevent exposure and spread of COVID-19 by employees or vendors who enter and work at the market?

Inform them before, during, and after each market date to monitor their symptoms for dry cough, fever and shortness of breath. If an employee or a vendor does not look well or is continually coughing, they should be sent home to care for themselves and should only return when the symptoms are gone.

There can be a lot of interaction at a market booth, what can a manager or employees do to decrease the possibility of contamination in high touch areas in a market?

Farmers markets should take a few important steps to decrease the chance of contamination of high touch areas. They need to:

1. Educate all employees and vendors on high touch locations within the market. Point out booth tables, canopy poles, pamphlet holders, restroom doors and handles, faucet handles, soap dispensers, towel dispensers, sanitizer dispensers, cash, ATM machine, credit card readers, registers, and tablet screens. There are so many contact points and awareness is critical.
2. Promote and post illustrative handwashing signs at each venue entrance, in restrooms, and vendor booths or vendor areas.
3. Assign an employee to thoroughly wipe down the information booth, pamphlet holders, restroom doors and handles, handwashing faucets, soap dispensers, towel dispensers, and stationary or portable sanitizer stations. This should be done at least every hour or more frequently if possible.
4. Assign an employee to monitor the soap, towels, and sanitizer dispensers and to refill them before they become empty.
5. Purchase portable hands-free sanitizer stations and post them at each venue entrance. Positioning sanitizer stations at every vendor booth or area, and at information booths will help improve the likelihood that people will use them.
6. Inform employees and vendors to properly and immediately sanitize surfaces that they touch.

Ok, it sounds like taking these actions can go a long way to minimize surface contamination. So, when it comes to contact at vendor booths, what can a market do to reinforce social distancing at the vendor's sales area?

Managers or employees should post illustrative and bold social distancing signs at each vendor booth informing customers to maintain at least a 6-foot distance between people while waiting in line. You can place tape on the ground to mark off 6-foot clearances between the booth and the next person in line.

Alright. So, my next question has to do with the food itself. It's often on display, so what can a vendor do to prevent the food they are selling from becoming contaminated within their booth?

The vendor can do a few things to keep their foods safe and free from contamination:

1. They can ask the customer not to touch the food product by posting and enforcing a "you touch-you buy" policy.
2. They can pull and bag the food for the customer.
3. If the customer brings their own reusable bag, the vendor should never touch the bag.
4. The vendor can bring their own portable handwash station to use while in the booth and after handling cash or anytime their hands become contaminated.

In the interest of keeping the number of people low, can a farmers market close its restrooms to the public? Or can it make them only available to vendors and employees?

Depending on the jurisdiction, restrooms must always be available to everyone during the farmers market operating times.

Got it. So, do you have any tips for managers who need some way to prevent large numbers of people from accumulating within the market?

I'd suggest appointing an employee to monitor the number of people entering and gathering in different places within the market. They can help regulate and disperse groups when people become too close and are less than 6-feet from each other. If the market or venue includes events where people tend to gather, such as a band performing, that event should be discontinued. Also, if possible, decrease and close off entry points so the monitor can take counts of the customers entering the market.

Great, these are very practical, implementable solutions, Michele. Thanks for sharing your insight with us about how farmers markets can manage contact and contamination, enforce social distancing, and operate safely.

[Do's & Don'ts]

Now let's review two basic checklists. These are farmers market do's and don'ts that can help keep people and products safe while providing essential market foods and services.

To safely operate, markets, swap meets, and produce vehicles, should implement policies and reinforcements such as the following:

[Employees & Booth Vendors]

1. Exclude ill or potentially exposed employees and vendors.
 - Anyone appearing ill at the start of work or during a shift must be sent home immediately.
 - If employees or vendors live with someone showing symptoms of acute respiratory illness, such as fever at or above 100.4°F, coughing, and shortness of breath, or who has tested positive for COVID-19, they must stay at home and not return until there are no signs of symptoms.

2. Limit goods to those considered essential such as groceries and household consumer products.
3. Practice and promote safe handwashing hygiene: wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
 - Do so before eating or drinking, putting on gloves, using the restroom, or when hands become contaminated.
4. Do not touch your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
5. Cover a cough or sneeze with a sleeve or disposable tissue and wash hands after.
6. Social distance -always keep at least 6 feet between people.

[Operations]

1. Discontinue all food preparation booths
2. Do not allow sampling of unpackaged food.
3. Space booths to increase social distancing among patrons
 - Including while they wait in line and walk throughout the market.
4. Limit the number of customers at a given time as necessary to reduce crowding and regulate the number of people accumulating in lines.
5. Limit the sale of food to whole uncut produce and prepackaged food items.
6. Encourage produce vendors to pre-bag produce to expedite purchasing.
7. Ensure handwashing stations are provided adjacent to restroom facilities and stocked with soap and paper towels at all times.
8. Increase the cleaning and sanitizing frequency of restroom and other high contact areas, tables, payment devices, and other high touch surfaces.

[Support Share Care]

And to support the community and those in need, especially in light of the impact of COVID-19, at the end of the market, utilize local food recovery systems to donate any extra food.

[Contra Costa Farmers Market]

The farmers market within Contra Costa County modified their set up, their procedures, their messaging, and their operations to accommodate both the need to operate and the need to operate safely. Here's some observations about adjustments they made from their Executive Director, Staci DeShasier

"[We] arrived onsite at 6am. We held a brief staff meeting standing 6' apart where we discussed the new modifications we would be operating under. Staff then quickly went to work closing the road as we normally would do. Vendors were directed into their stall spaces according to our modified map allowing for 10' of space between all booths.

"Customers shopped and moved on which is exactly what we were hoping for... At one point a line formed at a popular organic veggie grower but they managed it well, checking people out quickly and the customers naturally formed a wide line giving each other space and waited patiently.

"We know there are those concerned about the market being open and we will continue an educational campaign this week via our social media. We want to assure the public that markets have been deemed essential and are operating for the specific function of providing groceries and preserving the local food system.

For more information about the Contra Costa Certified Farmers Market visit CCCFM.org and cchealth.org. For additional guidance visit the CDC, Cal/OSHA, AFDO, and FDA links below.

Also check out the resources attached to this video including checklists, policy examples, and sample signage to help formulate a social distancing and safe operations plan for farmers markets, meets, and produce vehicles.

This Just-in-Time from NEHA regarding COVID-19 Farmers Market Safe Operations has been brought to you by the National Environmental Health Association. Please visit our website at NEHA.org for more information about our members and our service to the environmental health community.