



COVID-19: fight or flight

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As a farming organization certifying high-welfare, pasture-based farming practices, we are used to challenges, but this is unlike anything we have faced before. As COVID-19 rolled over the world like an unwelcome smog it became increasingly obvious that organizations and businesses paralyzed by the overwhelming feeling of helplessness would struggle to survive. As the weeks roll on, we realize this may be the defining lesson for the future of sustainable agriculture.

Early in the pandemic A Greener World paused auditing, transitioned to remote work and focused solely on meeting our farmers' needs and helping them adapt to a radically different reality. While this shift happened relatively quickly, I saw more complex supply chains struggle to adapt. If there is wisdom to be gleaned from reflecting as this pandemic unfolds, we hope our observations and conclusions can be of use.

From the vantage point of independent, sustainable agriculture, this is what we've seen:

- Panic-buying and shocked supply chains. While conventional supply chains are very efficient, they can also be unwieldy—when they stop, they stop hard, putting a lot of volume on hold.
- Farms whose products are normally processed further (e.g., milk) having to dispose of products due to supply chain disruptions, low processing capacity and predatory practices by processors. This is hard for farmers, made even more distressing in the face of widespread food insecurity.
- Rejection of science on a terrifying scale, even among the most powerful decision makers. We saw conversa-

tions quickly polarized, preventing obvious and sensible solutions.

- A range of personal reactions. Team members with practical farming experience pivoted extremely quickly from one role to another, while those without farming experience appeared to take a few days longer. This may reflect the two groups' different skillsets, as well as the unshakable ingenuity of farmers.
- Immediate adaptation by farmers able to market directly to consumers. Many of the supply chains we're working with are shorter and more nimble, allowing them to respond quickly to changing needs.
- State and federal governmental responses all over the map, with some states going in and out of lockdown seemingly without justification, others coordinating country-worthy responses, and others proudly burying their heads in the sand.

Many have observed that COVID-19 is a practice round for how we as a planet will respond to the increasing threats of climate change. If so, I fear we will fail the test tragically unless we make some urgent changes. While this pandemic is still unfolding, I hope we may draw some lessons that could strengthen future efforts to tackle global challenges constructively:

- (1) Let go of assumptions. What worked before will likely fail now, and traditional strengths may be weaknesses—and vice versa.
- (2) Ensure the health and safety of the most vulnerable: the elderly, the healthcare workers, economically disadvantaged, the incarcerated, those on the front lines of food and farming. Whether for altruistic or selfish reasons, caring for these groups keeps us all safer.
- (3) Listen to farmers and scientists—they understand the short and long-term impacts better than most. Lock the corporate lobbyists in the closet.
- (4) Give everyone a way to engage. (Example: A Greener World's supporters pitched in to fund food bank donations from farmers without markets, getting nutritious,

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pasture-raised meats, dairy and eggs to people most in need).

- (5) Get comfortable with a certain amount of redundancy. Airplanes have two control systems in case one goes down, yet we have no backup in agriculture. Eliminating all of the redundancies in our food system in the pursuit of “efficiency” has made it fragile. Planning and redundancy are keys to a functioning system—whether it’s food or healthcare.

These lessons are learned through a lens of agriculture, but I challenge you to find a global challenge that isn’t. In five decades of farming I’ve noticed that nothing makes us think about farmers as much as empty grocery store shelves. Our flagship certification and food label, Certified Animal Welfare Approved by AGW, was launched on the precipice of a national recession here in the United States, and I would not be surprised to see a resurgent interest in those who feed us.

We work with farmers operating largely outside of the current norm. The vast majority of farm animals in the United States are raised in industrial confinement systems that rely on routine antibiotics, lax environmental and labor regulations, uncompetitive markets and subsidies maximizing supply to the benefit of processors and detriment of producers. Animals are also brought to market just in time, which means that as processing capacity failed, production continued, leaving massive oversupply. The system is so finely tuned that a few weeks’ pause results in animals too big for processing and handling equipment, as well as too late for the projected demand. This is resulting in animals being euthanized and dumped. This is not an indictment of farmers in this system—farmers can only produce for the markets available to them. The way we farm in the United States is a direct product of seeing food through the sole lens of price and profit, and of not demanding better.

The UN’s FAO has called for agroecology as solution for climate change. This is what our farmers do—biodiverse stewardship that protects the environment, supports public health and nourishes rural economies—but these neighbors and environmental stewards are at risk. The most vulnerable part of sustainable agriculture is the part that was just

making it into the mainstream—the restaurant suppliers, the school meal suppliers, all those approaching change at the scale we so desperately need. We have just started to see schools serving pasture-raised meats, dairy and eggs from independent, sustainable producers, foods renowned for their nutritional benefits and valued for keeping food dollars in the local community. I am very concerned about these markets and their ability to rebound, unless we fight for them now.

This is a challenging time for sustainable agriculture. Not necessarily on every farm—many are doing what they do every day: raising animals, fruits and vegetables for appreciative communities—but challenging for the trajectory of this movement. And this challenge will require new and honed skills as we navigate a post-pandemic world. Tweaking at the fringes will not work—now or in the future. If we in sustainable agriculture continue to be satisfied with having our impact quarantined to farmers markets and private gardens, we will not make the changes the next generation deserves. I challenge everyone meeting this moment to use it to reimagine the scale of the problems before us, as well as the urgency of their solutions, and face both head-on with clear purpose.

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