



Pastured Meat Producers are Facing Catastrophic Losses. These Efforts Could Help Them Weather the Pandemic.

Community-based initiatives have sprung up to support independent livestock producers shift to new markets.

BY **LYNNE CURRY**

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Every spring, **Prodigal Farm** in Rougement, North Carolina, hosts Baby Goat Festival Days, which draws more than 1,000 people to the small, pasture-based dairy in rural Durham County. The revenue from the annual event, along with sales of milk, farmstead cheese, and goat meat at farmers' markets and through restaurants and wholesale accounts, keeps the family operation afloat.

"Obviously, that's not happening [now]," said farmer Kathryn Spann, reckoning with the new reality of banned public events, restaurant and school closures, and work-from-home orders due to COVID-19. "This is the season when our payroll is highest because lots of babies are being born, and we've just taken a two-thirds to three-quarters haircut in our revenue," she said.

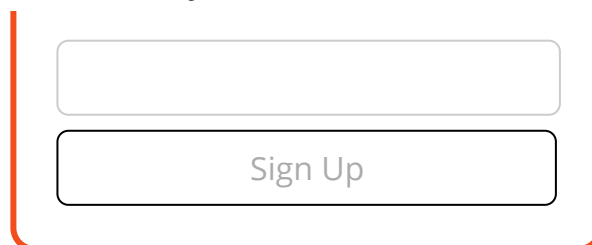
Recently, when 90 kids were born over an eight-day period, the farm's volunteers were all self-isolating at home, leaving Spann and her husband with a shortage of labor. "You can't just hit the pause button," she said. "We've got all these babies to care for, not to mention the adults."

Across the country, small-scale livestock producers like Spann are facing catastrophic losses. "Our world has been upended," reported Indiana farmer Greg Gunthorp to Civil Eats after Chicago chef Rick Bayless closed Frontera Grill, his biggest customer. "It's like we were hit by a train."

For Oregon-based **regenerative rancher Cory Carman**, restaurant accounts—from New York City's fast-casual Dig Inn to Portland's white-tablecloth restaurants—make up half

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of her grass-fed beef business. But she won't be collecting on any outstanding invoices for **Carman Ranch** beef. "You cannot demand payment when you know they have no money coming in," she said.



COVID-19 is a disaster of unforeseen magnitude for all small-scale farmers. But it's especially challenging for those raising animals. Livestock involve years of planning, with heavy investments in animals that require breeding, feed, and pasture or housing and take months or years to grow while farmers live off loans.

"Farmers are facing heartbreaking decisions," said Andrew Gunther, executive director of **A Greener World**, the organization that offers Animal Welfare Approved (AWA) certification. "[They can] slaughter animals with no market and store products at significant cost, change the animals' diet, hoping the market returns quickly, or effectively dump products into the commodity market at a price below production."

In a matter of weeks, the economic outlook for farmers who produce food for local and regional markets—around **8 percent** of American farms and ranches—has turned dire. On March 18, the **National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition** (NSAC) **estimated** that lost sales could total over \$680 million between March and May. "Without immediate mitigation, we may lose many small, socially disadvantaged, and beginning farms and the important markets they serve," according to NSAC.

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The **\$2 trillion CARES Act** passed by Congress last week provides \$24 billion in emergency aid for farmers and ranchers. But it is unclear to many if it will provide direct assistance to small-scale livestock producers as they endure the pandemic.

As the wave of shutdowns and closures wreak havoc on local economies, nonprofits, businesses, and community groups are mobilizing as ad-hoc rapid

response teams. They have a clear call to action: Save small, pasture-based meat producers.

Teaming Up to Assist Farmers Find Markets

Some of the first responders in this farm crisis were shuttered restaurants including **Coquine** in Portland, **Black Cat** in Boulder, and **Dish Society** in Houston, which hosted pop-up markets to create ready-made sales channels for their networks of farms and ranches.

When New Hampshire farmers' markets closed, **Three River Farmers Alliance**, a network of local farms in the seacoast region of the state, instituted emergency home delivery service for locally sourced vegetables, meats, and cheeses from dozens of small-scale producers all the way to the Boston suburbs. **The Good Meat Project** is operating a community switchboard to connect farmers with, and coordinate sales to, customers who are looking to buy locally raised, higher animal welfare meats.

And in the Hudson Valley, livestock farmers created a directory so that if someone gets sick, they can call in help.

"It's a collective response," Kathleen Finlay, president of **Glynwood**, a nonprofit farm and training center serving new farmers and food professionals in the Hudson Valley and New York City. Last week, she jumped in to deliver Glynwood Grazed shares and redistribute pasture-raised meats that could no longer go to restaurants. "It's just an incredible effort to work together and help each other through this time," she said.

A second wave of support for small farms came from dozens of agriculture organizations—from state departments of agriculture and farm bureaus to community-based organizations and university extension offices. These entities curated webpages of COVID-19 resources for farmers with FAQs, health safety protocols, financial assistance, and free trainings.



Ranchers gathering at Carman Ranch. (Photo © Talia Jean Galvin)

Within days, the national [Niche Meat Processors Assistance Network](#) (NMPAN), an organization that provides technical assistance on meat processing to livestock producers, logged over 300 hundred signups for an April webinar on online sales and logistics, compared to a more typical enrollment of around 30.

Additionally, some sustainable ag organizations pivoted to crisis management. [A Greener World](#) ceased on-farm audits to conduct outreach to the farming community. “The stories we’re hearing aren’t good—losses of over 70 percent in orders, farmers ... wondering how they’ll buy food for their animals,” Gunther wrote in an email. “I don’t have to explain to you what this will mean in six months’ time if we can’t figure out how to help them now.”

After calling more than 100 livestock producers around the country last week, Gunther had a clearer picture of the impacts—and his staff plans to contact hundreds more. “We’ve got three types of farmers,” he told Civil Eats. First, the most challenged: those who lost their markets without warning when restaurants closed overnight. “Farmers are absolutely understanding of that action, but it doesn’t stop them being in trouble,” said Gunther. If you have 2,000 chickens on a

farm, the feed costs are over \$500 a week, which without any sales become unsustainable, he explained.

Second, livestock producers who depend on farmers' markets are on shaky ground. In communities across the country, **farmers' markets are fighting** to remain open, and those in cities such as **Los Angeles**, Madison, Nashville, and Honolulu have been forced to close.

But the last group is experiencing a surge: farmers with existing retail partners and/or direct-to-consumer sales channels in place are doing surprisingly well, Gunther said. This swell in demand brings its own set of challenges, however. "They need to procure a product in a way that's sustainable and thoughtful," Gunther said. "It's a very fragile, young supply chain right now."

Half of rancher Cory Carman's business came through restaurant accounts. And when COVID-19 closures killed her wholesale business, her direct-to-consumer sales shot up tenfold within a week, and she has the capacity to meet that demand. Even so, "it's still a fraction of the business we had with restaurants," said Carman.

More importantly, there's a lot more involved in a sustainable livestock business than sales volume. Carman has spent years scaling her grass-fed beef business and partners with several other ranches with the same values and management practices aimed at improving soil health. Having multiple sales channels allowed Carman so ensure she sold every part of the animal—but that's no longer guaranteed.

Now, she's sending out inventory lists to regional grocers hoping they'll buy more. "Our supply chain is so simple," Carman said. "Everything that made us a little less efficient, a little less competitive before is making us more resilient, more secure, and more responsive now."

Increased Demand for Meat

For this group of farmers, there's one bright spot: The recent skyrocketing appetite for all groceries, including meat—one staple the public is buying in bulk in response to the pandemic. Retail meat sales **were 70 percent higher this March** compared to the same period in 2019, according to the consumer packaged goods data company IRI.

"We're moving a lot of product in retail," confirmed Dan Probert, marketing director for the Oregon-based ranchers' cooperative **Country Natural Beef**, which sells to Whole Foods, New Seasons, and other independent grocers. And that revenue is

going directly to the 90 members, mostly family ranches, ranging from a few head to 1,000 head of cattle, scattered all over the west from Arizona to Wyoming.

Similarly, in North Carolina, when the cooperative [North Carolina Natural Hog Growers Association](#) lost two wholesale accounts this week, Whole Foods bought all their pork, according to AGW's Gunther.

“We’ve made more changes in two weeks than we’d have planned in two years”

While grocery stores are picking up the slack left by other wholesale buyers, direct-to-consumer operations are also seeing an uptick. All the farmers contacted by Civil Eats reported skyrocketing CSA subscriptions and online orders in their regions. That's good news for some ranchers, but it leaves

others, especially new farmers who depend on farmers' markets, struggling to pivot.

“It sounds easy, but it's actually hard, and costs money,” said Finlay from Glynwood. Shipping, delivery, and payment processing systems don't come together overnight.

Greg Gunthorp says that after losing the restaurant business his farm was able to “flex to retail sales” quickly thanks to farmer friends with existing online platforms to sell the pork. “We’ve made more changes in two weeks than we’d have planned in two years,” he added.

But many small-scale livestock producers don't have the advantage of large social media followings or a recognized brand, like Gunthorp, and most aren't well-equipped—with the technical skills or staff—to respond to the soaring demand.

Though Prodigal Farms is located near the triangle of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill, “It's really hard to suddenly retool the operation to develop a distribution system,” said Kathryn Spann.

She is revamping her website with a plan to ship protein boxes to New York, where she worked as a lawyer for many years. “I know folks are really concerned about having access to quality food [without] leaving their homes,” she said. She's hopeful that she can set up a new system to process online orders and arrange for shipping containers. “But that might be magical thinking,” she said. All the while, she and her

husband, Dave, are tending to 85 does, three bucks, and 110 kids—with more on the way.

Another difference livestock producers face is that, unlike specialty vegetable growers, they don't have complete control over the processing for their animals. The roughly 800 small-scale slaughter plants around the country are also experiencing a deluge of business, according to NMPAN director Rebecca Thistlethwaite.

As for the risk of those meat processors contracting COVID-19 and creating a supply chain bottleneck, Thistlethwaite said, "They're probably some of the safest food processing facilities out there for keeping workers healthy." Not only do they routinely practice food safety and sanitation procedures, but most are already offered paid sick time. And unlike giant meatpacking plants that have reported COVID-19 incidents in the past few weeks, these workers are not standing elbow to elbow, she explained.

Creating Resilient Local Food Systems

Strong consumer support for farm-raised meat is one good sign of hope for these farmers. But according to Alice Rolls, president of [Georgia Organics](#), an organization that supports Georgia organic farmers, "it's not going to replace lost revenues."

Along with providing an online portal to products from regional farms and ranches, this organization led a coalition with seven other Georgia food organizations to sponsor [The Farmer Fund](#). The COVID-19 emergency relief effort, originally created to provide economic relief after hurricanes and other natural disasters, now aims to provide direct contributions to farmers, along with farm-to-frontline support for community members in need. Meanwhile, the Chicago-based [Food and Animal Concerns Trust](#) launched a national \$30,000 emergency mini-grant fund to help poultry and livestock producers capture the boom in online food sales.

"This is a point of opportunity for singing beyond the choir and getting more people and our political leaders to understand resilient communities rely on resilient food systems locally," said Rolls.

With the CARES Act signed into law, there is new hope for financial relief for farmers and ranchers, but many questions remain. "Farmers are so confused about what they can and cannot access from this federal stimulus package," said Maia Hardy, manager for the Ag of the Middle Accelerator program at [Ecotrust](#). She

works with dozens of independent farmers, 80 percent of them livestock producers who are looking to create viable businesses.

“Small farmers are also at the front lines of this crisis, getting hit not only by business closures but also an unprecedented increase in demand,” wrote Oregon Congressman Earl Blumenauer in an email to Civil Eats. “We need to ensure that they have the infrastructure they need so that our food system can withstand this crisis.” Blumenauer pushed to allocate funding for regional systems that did not make it into the final bill. “I will continue fighting for it,” he wrote.

“It’s kind of sad to think I’ve spent half of my life working on building local and regional food systems and it really could be all over,” said Gunthorp. He speculated that the stimulus bill could help him cover some of his payroll costs, but in the end “time will tell whether our lender and our desire to borrow more funds will allow us to keep the farm.”

In the meantime, he plans to make the best of it because, “that’s what farmers do.”

“It’s going to be a tough year for farmers and producers,” said Finlay from Glynwood. “The moment is now for people to realize that a homogenized centralized food system that values profit over health is one that is fragile. And I hope it underscores the importance of building these de-centralized, robust regional hubs of food production that are healthier and better for the environment.”

Spann from Prodigal Farm admits that this crisis has brought her close to the breaking point. But she said, “My hope is that out of this, we develop an infrastructure that makes it easier for people to do this on a sustained basis and

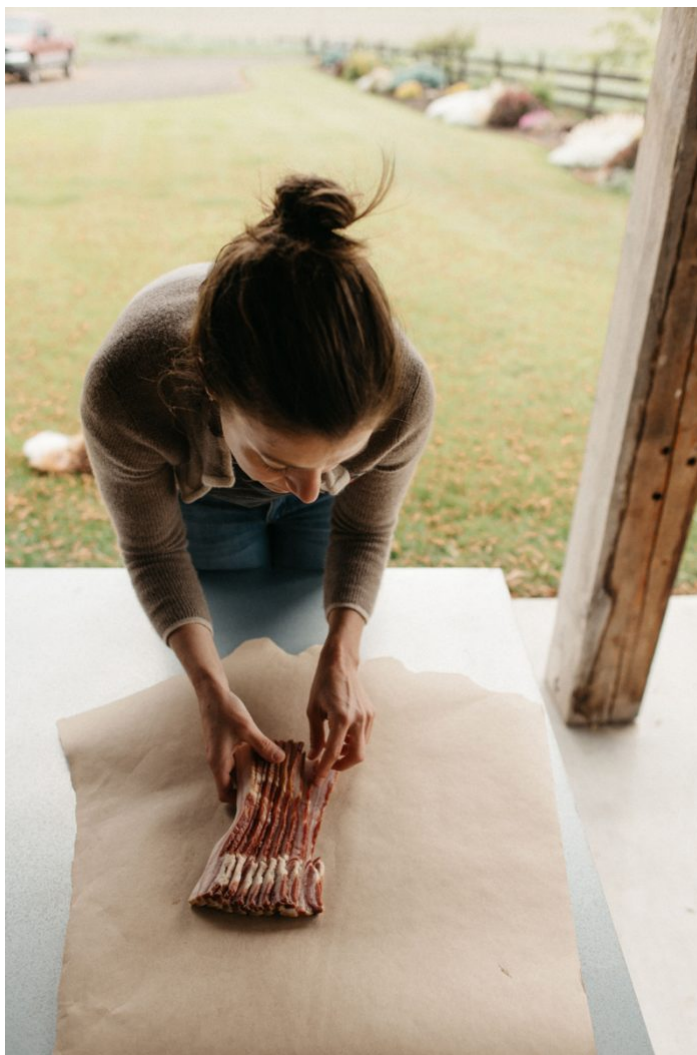


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that even while socially distant, we become more interconnected in feeding each other.”

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