



**Wallace Center**  
AT WINROCK INTERNATIONAL



# FARMERS TO FAMILIES FOOD BOX RESEARCH FINDINGS

JANUARY 2021





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In April 2020, when the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) rolled out the Farmers to Families Food Box program (FFFB) in response to supply chain disruptions and spikes in food insecurity caused by COVID-19, the Wallace Center at Winrock International sprang into action to ensure participation by the local and regional food businesses and organizations we serve. Over the course of five months, we provided direct technical assistance to farmers, food hubs, and distributors whose locally focused markets had disappeared due to the pandemic. These farmers and local food businesses looked to the program to replace lost markets for the healthy foods they had growing in their fields and sitting in their coolers, to maintain their staff and operations, and to provide hunger relief in their communities.

AMS estimates that approximately 55 of the organizations selected as contractors in the first two rounds of the FFFB program were working with and sourcing from local and regional farms. Collectively

these contracts were an investment of over \$84M in local farms, regional businesses, and communities. For context, that is over three times the total amount invested in local and regional food systems by USDA-AMS through the FMLFPP program in 2020. The Wallace Center conducted research with about half of these locally-sourcing contractors to understand the program's impact on their work, gather information that could inform the implementation of emergency nutrition and farmer-support efforts, and help shape future programs that leverage USDA direct procurements.

The Wallace Center received responses to surveys from 21 of the 55 local-sourcing contractors from rounds one and two and conducted formal, follow-up interviews with seven of these respondents. The research and data in this report reflects the program implementation and input from those 21 contractors, whose responses we chose to anonymize to ensure that they would be comfortable openly sharing their feedback with the Wallace Center, our research partners, and the USDA.



The research indicates that the local and regional contractors were overwhelmingly successful in implementing the program, which provided a critically important outlet for small to midsize producers whose markets disappeared in the spring of 2020. It shored up regional supply chains, and it provided fresh, healthy, culturally appropriate foods to emergency nutrition operations and the people they serve in urban and rural communities across the country.

The program's early flexibility enabled organizations and businesses that had never been able to participate in USDA commodity programs demonstrate the strength and responsiveness of their enterprises and networks. For example, flexibility in the kinds of boxes contractors could provide and the contents of these boxes allowed contractors to concentrate on the products they know best, adapt to seasonality during the year, and provide culturally appropriate foods to different communities at a fair and competitive price. The willingness of AMS to provide small contracts enabled small companies to stay solvent and to source from small farms, serve a diverse set of small emergency food relief organizations, and reach rural and remote communities that large companies can't or won't serve. Assessing applicants on their ability to provide high quality, appropriate foods in household sizes rather than on low cost boxes meant AMS' support went to small and mid-sized specialty crop producers who could serve their communities effectively with no food waste.

The FFFB contractor selection criteria shifted to a primary focus on low-price in rounds three and four of the program. These contractors could not compete while still providing farmers and workers a fair price and wages. The result: the producers these contractors purchased from lost a market channel that had provided prices commensurate with their pre-COVID customers. Further, the small emergency nutrition organizations they served in urban and rural communities -- many of which operate outside of food bank networks -- lost access to healthy, appropriate fresh food. Jobs that had been created to meet increasing community food needs were lost and some contractors had to lay off permanent staff when they did not receive contracts in rounds three and four.



We recognize that AMS had to create the FFFB quickly and it is remarkable how well the process worked considering the immense pressures the agency was under. We understand the complexity of the task they were given and appreciate how responsive staff leadership has been and their willingness to engage with us directly about the feedback and questions we gathered from local contractors. While the program has been criticized and there have been missteps, it is evident that many aspects of this program worked very well and that the impact of the FFFB program had on the local contractors we worked with, the farmers that they source from, and the communities that they serve has been profound. Furthermore, this program provided a model not only for another round of COVID relief in 2021, but also for the local and regional food sector to participate in USDA commodity purchasing in the future. This program proved the concept that the dual goals of hunger relief and supporting small farmers don't have to be at odds and can in fact be systematically achieved in concert.





## THE CONTRACTORS

After the original contracts were awarded, AMS identified 55 contractors that were sourcing from local and regional farms and helped Wallace Center connect with them. Contracts awarded to these organizations ranged from \$3,600 to over \$27M. The Wallace Center surveyed 21 of these FFFB contractors and conducted in-depth interviews with seven of those surveyed. The organizations surveyed are based in 15 states and received a total of \$41 million in contracts in the first two rounds of this program, \$28

million of which was paid to producers. Collectively, they delivered 1,760,596 boxes of fresh, healthy food to families in need. These contractors received contracts for rounds one and two. Some received Basic Ordering Agreements (BOAs) and applied for rounds three and four, but none received contracts in those final rounds.

The contractors we surveyed are diverse but share a common focus: working with small and mid-sized producers using sustainable production methods, serving local and regional markets, supporting a diverse farming sector, and advancing healthy and

### FRESH APPROACH

Concord, CA

**Total Contract Value: \$1.8m**

Fresh Approach, which is a non-profit organization operating multiple food security and nutrition education programs in the Bay Area, took a value chain coordination approach to their contract, and created a web of food hubs, BIPOC farmers, and community-based organizations working together to build and distribute boxes. A decentralized program allowed the nonprofits that Fresh Approach partnered with to tailor their offerings to the communities they work in. Fresh Approach took a coordination role, aligning supply and demand and distributing funding to multiple small organizations, including farmers' market associations, farms, non-profit farms, and urban farms, who could best navigate the assets and needs of their communities. Andy Ollove of Fresh Approach noted: "We used the model of recruiting small organizations... We could get into invisible communities with really high touch. In some cases, we were getting food to people one mile from where it was grown. To do that most effectively, you think of it as a network rather than an individual nonprofit."

## GROWFOOD CAROLINA

Charleston, SC

**Total Contract Value: \$51,000**

GrowFood Carolina is a non-profit food hub that primarily served restaurants in coastal South Carolina. Many of the small farmers that GrowFood served had very few market opportunities when COVID hit, as restaurants and farmers markets closed. GrowFood's FFFB contract allowed them to supply food banks, food pantries, and community-based nonprofits who they had previously been in touch with but had never had the impetus to engage in a meaningful partnership. They also worked with a local nutritionist to create recipes and demonstrate them at pickup locations to show families how to use the food they were receiving. The need for this type of support was so great GrowFood worked to raise over \$200,000 to continue their program when they weren't awarded a contract in round 3. They hope to continue serving their neighbors in this capacity in the long term.

resilient food systems. About half the contractors are businesses including farms and food hubs, half are nonprofit organizations, one is a school district, and one a consumer grocery coop. The business and non-profit organizations vary in size, but all qualify as small businesses/operations.

Existing relationships with local producers and farm groups helped the contractors quickly source products to meet their contractual commitments to USDA AMS, including when it meant scaling up operations substantially. Contractors were able to reconfigure

existing local and regional distribution networks to deliver boxes efficiently. Experience with Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) aggregation and distribution equipped the contractors with the knowledge necessary to right-size products for household use. Most contractors are deeply embedded in the communities in which they operate so they were able to fill boxes with culturally appropriate foods, deliver them to those most in need, and minimize waste.

USDA AMS stood up the FFFB program quickly in order to address the urgent needs of farmers and



## **EASTERN MARKET CORPORATION**

**Detroit, MI**

**Total Contract Value: \$1.25m**

Eastern Market is a farmers' market and regional food hub based in Downtown Detroit. They used funding from USDA to provide food to 12 community-based nonprofits on the front line of food insecurity, housing insecurity, and serving seniors, sourcing from 15 farms in the region. They also directly delivered boxes to some community members and created pick-up options at their market as well. Eastern Market also rolled out a non-subsidized direct to consumer box program which allowed them to increase their financial viability while maximizing the impact of their logistical expertise. The market demand from the Farmers to Families Food Box also allowed Eastern Market to achieve GAP certification and to support GAP certification for two small farmers.

communities in the early stages of the pandemic. The application process was new to all the contractors. Preparing a bid and complying with Federal contract reporting required a significant amount of time, expertise, and training. New logistics systems had to be designed that met the needs of the producers and worked with the contractors' capacity. Contractors also had to identify and organize a distribution system adapted to local needs and the resources of the agencies providing emergency feeding. In a matter of a few weeks, boxes and other materials had to be sourced, and staff had to be hired and trained to pack and deliver boxes.

Even within these constraints, these contractors focused their sourcing locally (USDA's criteria of within 400 miles or the same state) from producers using sustainable, regenerative, and organic production practices and from Black, Indigenous and People of Color-owned farms. They bought from a total of 420 producers who were paid fair market prices. Many contractors reported working closely with farmers to identify a mutually agreed upon price, which was usually above wholesale rates.

The contractors played a critical and complex role in making the FFFB program work for the communities they served and passed about 69% of what they received from USDA to the producers they bought from. They used the remainder of the funds to retain staff, keep the regional supply chain intact, and create 203 new jobs.

Most contractors were paid between \$25 and \$38 per box. Materials and transportation were most commonly listed as the primary non-food costs. The range of prices can be attributed to the contractors' focus on setting a price with growers that met their needs, different labor costs across regions, the range of product included in the boxes (seasonality), and the true cost of last mile distribution, particularly in hard-to-reach areas.

The locally-focused contractors were able to quickly and successfully implement this program due to their operational focus on local and regional supply chains and longstanding, trusting relationships across the value chain that are built on the shared values of local and regional cooperation. The contractors' models are inherently adaptable and built

## **A&H FARM**

**Manhattan, KS**

**Total Contract Value: \$1.3m**

A&H Farm is a fourth-generation diversified farm that also runs a CSA and multiple agri-tourism programs in rural Kansas. The FFFB contract was a lifeline for them when the local farmers market closed in March. They worked with other, small neighboring farms to provide produce to regional food banks, some as far as Denver and St Louis, and smaller food pantries that were too small to receive support from larger distributors. They also delivered directly to many individuals in their communities. Andrea DeJesus, who runs the farm with her husband, noted "I am my farm... This program was life-changing, not just for us, but for our partners as well."



## ZONE 7

Ringoes, NJ

**Total Contract Value: \$146,000**

Zone 7 connected with their network of local produce growers in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York to source and pack boxes of delicious, nutritious produce items for distribution as a part of the USDA Farmers to Families program. By working closely with Rolling Harvest, their non-profit partner which focuses on gleaning and linking local producers with food insecure communities, Zone 7 was able to reach over 7,000 individuals and families experiencing food insecurity in central New Jersey with the food boxes.

to be flexible to respond to changing market and supply demands. It is worth noting that many of the food hubs and nonprofits surveyed had been able to build the capacity of their operations and programs through investments of previous AMS-administered grant programs, such as the Local Foods Promotion Program.

Though the federally funded food box programs have ended for these contractors, the problems the FFFB program sought to alleviate have not. Though some restaurants have reopened, their demand is considerably lower. Similarly, some school systems and universities are feeding their students through prepared meals or other limited in-person options, though at a much lower capacity than prior to the pandemic. Many of the contractors the Wallace

Center spoke with continue to provide food boxes and emergency food relief through programs funded by local governments, foundations, and nonprofit groups. Many contractors expressed their desire to keep feeding their communities and providing a fair market for their local producers.

### THESE 21 CONTRACTORS REPRESENT:



**1,760,596** boxes delivered



**420** farms



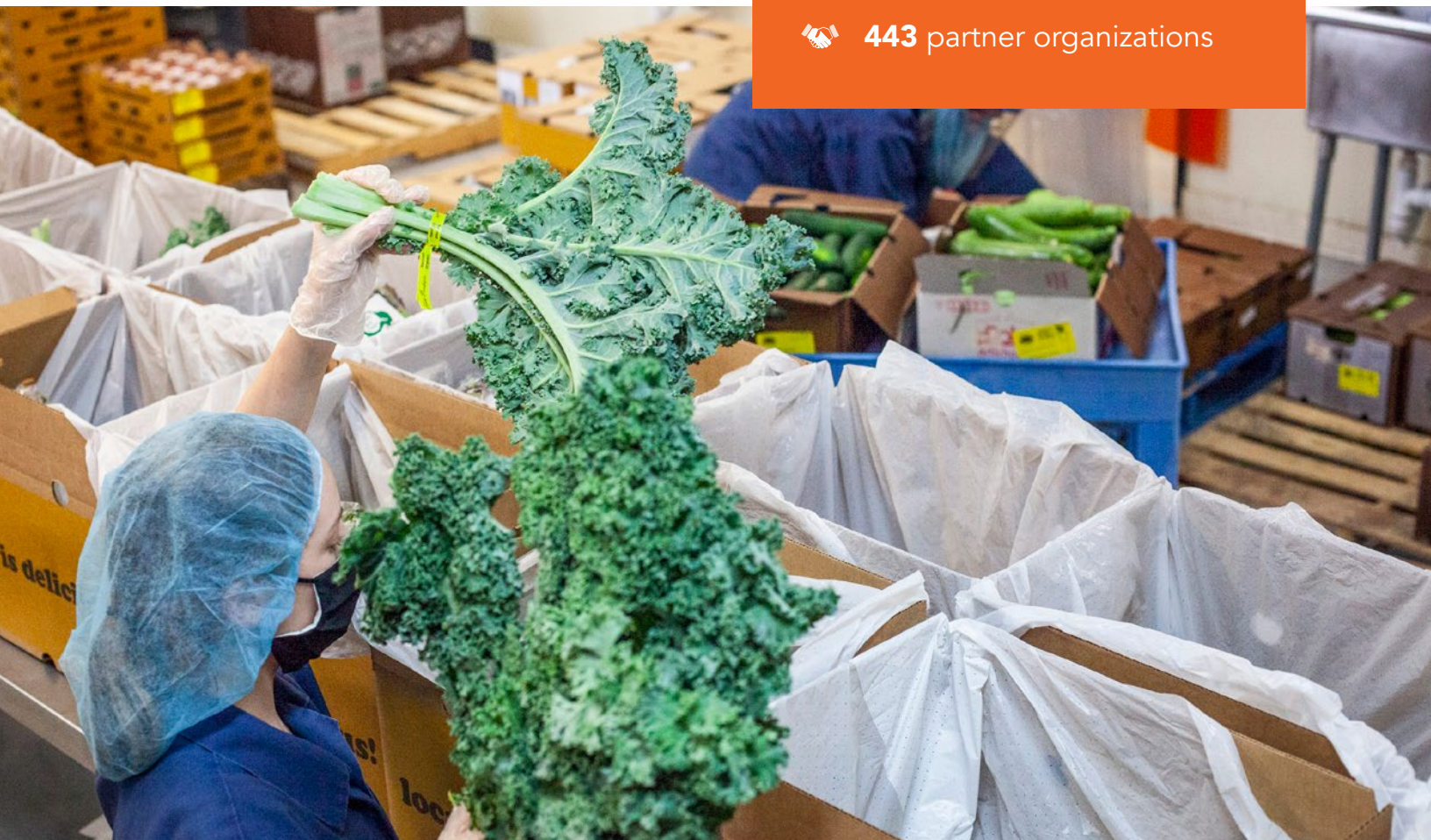
**203** jobs created



**\$28M** paid to producers



**443** partner organizations



## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Nearly all the contractors noted that this program was a critical lifeline for the farmers they purchased from, with many saying that this program saved farmers, and contractors, from going under.



Small and mid-size family producers told us that the existence of this program helped ensure the survival of their business in 2020. For many, their only sales were coming from the food box."



Every single farmer we worked with mentioned how we 'saved them.' For example, a berry farmer we purchased from was able to buy back a piece of equipment he had been forced to sell, and we prevented 45,000 cases of summer squash from being thrown away."



It was life-changing. Not just for us, but our partners as well. Our farm went from not knowing if we would survive to making payments and getting some money in the bank."



First thing I looked at: They're closing the schools. We're dead. 35-40% of our yogurts at this time were 5 lb. tubs of yogurt going into schools [at the onset of the pandemic]. The USDA contract is an amazing investment - it's helped us establish a local dairy."



This program allowed us to meet the needs of thousands in our small, rural county when very little assistance was available."



The network that was built up has helped keep many producers viable. By sharing resources, we built strong partnerships that allowed us to scale to 3,500 boxes per week. Individually that would not have happened."



It is an absolute shame that I have producers dumping produce now because there is not enough demand for their products, while at the same time our partnering agencies are seeing record numbers of clients. The number of boxes we were providing daily dropped from an average of 700,000 in round two to 80,000 in our foundation-funded program."





## FOOD DISTRIBUTION PARTNERS

The 21 Contractors we surveyed delivered boxes to a total of 443 organizations as well as to individual homes. Many worked with their local food bank, either providing boxes to them for subsequent redistribution or by relieving the food bank's load by delivering directly to pantries, shelters, and other non-profits they served. The contractors connected with a diverse network of public and private organizations in their communities beyond food banks and pantries, some of which were distributing food for the first time. For example, Riverside Unified School District served as the aggregator, distributor, and last-mile partner and fed its student community with healthy food boxes prepared by school food service staff from products sourced in its region.

Much of the success of locally focused contractors was the result of a system of mission-aligned businesses coming together to solve supply chain and distribution challenges. Pre-existing relationships allowed these contractors to identify emergency relief partners quickly and serve both large and small food distributors in urban and rural communities. Even when they had not previously worked together, distribution and nonprofit partners already knew and respected each other and came to the partnership

with aligned values and goals. GrowFood Carolina noted that, prior to the pandemic, they had been aware of the nonprofit who ended up being their last-mile distribution partner through the FFFB program but had not been able to find the right occasion to work together. This funding created that opportunity. Furthermore, the contractors' agility allowed some to provide home delivery in hard to reach rural communities and directly to vulnerable households. For example, Fresh Approach in California partnered with a neighborhood-level mutual aid effort that packed boxes at an urban farm and delivered them to families within a mile of the farm.

Contractors were able to turn relationships they held across the value chain into avenues for food box delivery. For example, Common Market sold to regional hospitals and then started delivering boxes that hospital staff provided to patients who screened for food insecurity and to uninsured diabetic patients. Another contractor pivoted from selling to a university's cafeterias to supplying boxes for the school's student food pantry. Community networks connected the contractors to churches, neighborhood associations, public and private schools, community health clinics, urban gardens, and farms that were very well situated to handle last mile distribution. One contractor estimated that at least 26 of the organizations they provided healthy food boxes to are not connected to the larger emergency food distribution network and are no longer receiving FFFB boxes.

In 2020 the established food bank system was stretched almost beyond the breaking point. The contractors Wallace Center spoke with emphasized that their efforts were a necessary supplement to the work being done by regional food banks. They also pointed out that their ability to provide pre-packed, household-sized boxes permitted small organizations without staff or volunteers or a secure cold chain to safely provide healthy, fresh food to their communities.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“

Most of our nonprofit partners were known to me by virtue of (an) existing network of farm markets in our rural area. The nonprofits we worked with were too small to receive a drop from any of the larger distributors.”

“

Food hubs like ourselves were able to take pressure off the food bank and food pantries because we were able to work with other community-led nonprofit partners on the front lines of food insecurity in our city. Many of our recipients do not have reliable transportation or access to food banks and pantries, making our neighborhood partnerships critical for 2,000 individuals and families every week. I am worried about the folks we served.”

“

[We were] consistently asked to increase production and in many cases were able to do so. We ended up running 24/7 with 3 shifts to try and meet demand.”

“

People requested more on a regular basis.”

“

Almost all of the food pantries that we were delivering to were small. Our average delivery was 125 boxes and under Round 3, they are not getting deliveries because they are being told that they will need a dock and pallet jack to unload and need to take an entire semi-load. Some are being told there isn't enough money in the contract to send small trucks and deliveries out to them.”

“

We were able to customize boxes to be culturally appropriate for different communities in Chicago. For example, we worked with rabbis to source kosher foods and then distribute them to the right people.”

“

Thank you so much for the fresh and beautiful food. Everyone is so appreciative because you guys gave us the best, and not spoil scrap. I feel so much better eating such quality foods.” --Box Recipient



## THE FARMS

The food box program in rounds one and two provided a crucial outlet for small and mid-sized producers whose markets dried up overnight with the outbreak of COVID-19. Many of the contractors' customers were public and private institutions (colleges, hospitals, schools) and restaurants, all of which scaled back drastically or ended purchases completely in the spring of 2020. The farmers they served faced plowing food under and both they and their distributors faced layoffs and bankruptcy.

Surveyed contractors purchased from a diverse range of farms. Data from one contractor showed that 30% were less than 100 acres and 70% were less than 1,000 acres. Many of the farms were also small, local (within 400 miles), and owned by people of color. Most but not all of the contractors we surveyed concentrated on fresh produce boxes but some also provided dairy products.

The FFFB program required GAP certified produce, which was a barrier for some farms that traditionally work with food hubs. Though this requirement, in some cases, limited the farms that locally-focused contractors could source from, it helped motivate GAP-ready farms who hadn't previously had an economic incentive to attain certification become GAP certified this year. Contractors reported that multiple farmers received certification as a result of the market opportunity that the contract afforded them. It similarly created an incentive for the hubs themselves to seek additional food safety certifications. Some growers were ready to continue their certification process but were unable to access the appropriate technical assistance quickly enough within the short timeline of the contract. It is clear that a guaranteed economic opportunity is a critical motivator for farms seeking food safety certification.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS



We grew quite a bit on our farm and supplemented that with product sourced primarily from other smaller, diversified farms within 20 to 30 miles of our farm."



We touched around 50 farms and several were able to obtain GAP Certification. Three were urban farms and most partners emphasized smaller farms, those owned by people of color, and reflected our values in doing so. All of the farms were relatively small."



Our vendor base consisted of small-scale family farms, including minority owned, organic, and beginning farmers. Most of our market was restaurants and there were limited alternatives because the farmers markets were closed in many cases."



Undersecretary Ibach visited our farm and saw our produce boxes. He said we had some of the best he had seen, yet we were denied for the 3rd round. I felt the 3rd round was all about cheap food versus high quality local food. "

# LESSONS LEARNED

Congress, USDA AMS, and the contractors we worked with performed above and beyond what could have been expected in an unprecedented, chaotic situation with multiple needs and sometimes conflicting demands. AMS's initial FFFB contracts represented a massive investment in local food systems that had positive impacts on small to midsize farms, local economies, and food security in communities across the country. Food hubs, farm-based businesses, community nonprofits and others were able to provide high quality fresh food distribution at a fair price and meet the USDA AMS contractor criteria, without any reported instances of food waste. The format in the first two rounds worked well for the contractors we spoke with and they would like the program to continue and to be included in future rounds.

**The twin goals of hunger relief and farm and supply-chain support should not be in conflict.** Investment in programs that develop and enhance resilient local supply chains can also effectively address community food insecurity and have the added benefit of contributing to stronger regional economies.

**Locally focused contractors are uniquely positioned to successfully implement a box program.** The flexibility of shorter supply chains, the connection to their communities, expertise in last mile logistics, and ability to scale up quickly made these contractors particularly effective at meeting the requirements of the program. These contractors believe that their successful experience with the food box program demonstrates their potential to sell fresh, healthy, regionally-produced foods through AMS's established commodity procurement systems in the future.

**Values-alignment and relationships between contractors and non-profit partners allowed for efficient service delivery.** Many of the locally-focused contractors had existing relationships with the nonprofits they partnered with to deliver food to families in need. They also tended to have similar values which allowed them to work together quickly to meet the needs of the farmers and community members simultaneously.

**Market-based programs drive development of supply chains.** Opening AMS's commodity procurement markets and directing money to these farms and supply chain organizations allowed them to achieve a scale that has not been available to them before. A clear market incentive also motivated farmers to seek GAP certification. Grant programs from USDA AMS have been critical to this sector for years but these contracts represent a significantly larger, direct investment in local food supply chains which allowed for much faster innovation, job creation, and supply chain development.

**AMS's various grant programs provided crucial seed funding to many of the locally-focused contractors.** Those prior investments from USDA helped them launch and grow so they were able to meet the extraordinary needs the country faced this year. Prior investments in the individual distributors, and also the networks of businesses and organizations that participated in this program, was critical to their success.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our research and consultation with contractors, we have a series of recommendations that will ideally support USDA in designing and implementing future programs like the Farmers to Families Food Box Program. Contractors that were sourcing from local and regional producers, such as food hubs and local distributors, were uniquely positioned to excel in this program due to their strong relationships on both ends of the value chain, and their ability to nimbly pivot their sourcing, operations, and distribution models to accommodate this program. Recognizing that there were many things that were outside of AMS's control, we encourage consideration of the following recommendations in future rounds and for AMS fresh commodity contracting in general:

**Keep what works:** Many contractors are fighting for the continuation of this program because of its overall effectiveness. One of the key factors that made this program so innovative was that the contracts went to intermediaries. This allowed food hubs and other supply chain entities to align the needs of farmers and their distribution partners and think creatively about building supply chains that worked for producers and consumers. Furthermore, the flexibility and focus on applicants' ability to meet the goals of the program in the first two rounds, rather than strictly the lowest price, was critical in creating opportunity for locally-focused contractors. This allowed for contractors to increase sourcing from small and BIPOC owned farms, and to pay them fairly. Contractors also applauded the ease of the invoicing system, the speed of payments, and USDA's communication with them in the early rounds. The BOA system also has potential to be a useful tool in future versions of this program given its longer-term contracts and its adaptability.

**Eliminate price as the determining factor in awarding bids:** The success of local contractors in the first two rounds of this program demonstrated that the twin goals of hunger relief and small- and mid-sized farm and local supply-chain support should not be in conflict. However, focusing exclusively on low price in subsequent rounds undercuts support for key segments of the US farm and food system during this emergency. Further, focusing on scale has completely deprived access to food for many of the organizations providing emergency food to the highest need communities through small, last-mile distributors that are not connected to larger scale food banks or food pantries.

**Contract decisions should support producers and supply chain organizations of all sizes, including support for small and very small businesses.** We suggest a scoring criteria matrix that reflects the following priorities:

Contractors that identify as or source from:

- Black, Indigenous and People of Color owned businesses,
- Veteran owned businesses
- Women owned businesses
- Small and very small businesses

Demonstrated relationships with producers in the region

Past track record of performance with the program

Demonstrated relationships with community organizations

Commitment to fair prices for producers documented through pricing criteria

Commitment to high quality food products

Ability to tailor boxes to food needs of community (i.e. cultural appropriateness)

Ability to include appropriate, household size/quantity of products

Ability to serve rural and other hard-to-reach communities

Ability to distribute to small organizations

Ability to distribute food in the region in which it was produced

Technical capacity based on connections to last mile distribution partners

Demonstrated commitment to minimizing food waste

**Allow for category-only boxes:** Many local contractors excelled in providing category-specific boxes, such as produce-only boxes, in the first two rounds. The preference for combination boxes in the third round made re-application unfeasible for many of these contractors, who were unable to reorient their operations to accommodate sourcing and separate cold chains for dairy, meat, and produce.

**Permit multiple contracts in the same jurisdiction and multiple contract sizes:** Sourcing from multiple contractors of different sizes that are partnering with different distribution partners within a region will help the program reach more beneficiaries.

**Extend the contract period of performance:** Two-month contracts with contractors do not provide an adequate time horizon for producers to plan production and harvest. Providing longer contracts will provide stability for producers, workforce, and uninterrupted food delivery. We recommend contracts cover at least a six-month period and ideally up to a year.

**Eliminate pre-cooked requirement for meat:** The “pre-cooked” requirement for meat products included in the box limits sourcing options from local ranchers and meat-producers that do not provide pre-cooked SKUs. Allowing for different meat product options, including healthy and safe dried meats like jerky, will give contractors and producers the amount of flexibility that will lead to innovation in providing high-quality, locally-produced meat to box recipients.

**Provide clear and consistent communications and right-sized technical assistance to applicants and contractors:** Many potential contractors who are well positioned to excel in this program may have no familiarity with USDA contracting systems or processes. Providing clear guidance to contractors throughout the bid process and implementation is critical for their success. It is evident that a lot of effort went into FAQs, webinars, and the WBSCM developed in the first rounds of this program. We encourage AMS to make use of and build upon those systems for providing information and technical assistance. USDA webinars and all written guidance should be aware of language barriers that may exclude certain eligible contractors. New potential contractors could also benefit from support through a system like NRCS’s Technical Service Providers (TSP) to supplement AMS’ staff capacity. USDA may also consider how to engage technical assistance providers beyond AMS such as Extension and State Departments of Agriculture to maximize access to this program.

**Continue using the BOA:** AMS’s willingness to use the BOA system is a positive innovation that could be applied in future instances to increase consistency and access to a broad range of commodity procurement programs. The BOA solicitation process should have resulted in contracts in rounds three and four for locally-sourcing contractors who were awarded in earlier rounds. However, this was not the case because the BOA was rolled out in concert with a shift toward prioritizing lower price contracts. In future iterations, the BOA process can provide additional stability for approved contractors because of its flexibility, longer timeline, and adaptability. BOAs allow Commodity Procurement to tailor the product specification to the needs of the recipients. The BOA approval process allows approved suppliers to access more opportunities seamlessly, which could increase the amount of locally-produced food purchased by USDA Commodity Procurement.

**Coordinate with technical service providers and state agencies to provide food safety and GAP certification technical assistance and auditing services** to contractors working to bring GAP-ready small- and mid-sized producers into their supply chains. The program’s food safety requirement that all contracted suppliers demonstrate GAP certification creates a strong incentive for farmers who have been considering certification to accelerate their process and receive a USDA GAP audit. GAP certification not only allows farmers to participate in this program but has the potential to unlock other wholesale markets that require GAP Certification.





## CONCLUSION

Based on our research, it is clear that USDA has a unique opportunity to simultaneously support small- and mid-sized farms, invest in local food supply chains, and address hunger. The FFFB program, conceived as a way to both support farm income and meet emergency food needs, was successful in those aims in the first two rounds for the businesses and organizations the Wallace Center interviewed. The program provided a 'proof of concept' that AMS Commodity Procurement can successfully transact with businesses in the local and regional food sector. The Farmers to Families Food Box Program demonstrated many tools and characteristics that can make similar programs resoundingly successful.

There is significant untapped potential for positive impact within the local food sector, and with support and partnership from USDA, programs like the Farmers to Families Food Box can help activate it. We are extremely grateful for the partnership and guidance that the Agency has provided the Wallace Center as we've supported and analyzed this program and look forward to continuing to explore the possibilities.

## ABOUT THE WALLACE CENTER

The Wallace Center at Winrock International is a national nonprofit that brings together diverse people and ideas to co-create solutions that build healthy farms, equitable economies, and resilient food systems. Wallace has been a leader in the development of healthy regional food and farming systems for over 35 years, working to scale up the supply and positive environmental, social, and economic benefits of regional, sustainably produced food. We seek to affect systems change to bring benefits to the environment, to communities, and to the farmers and food businesses that are the building blocks of a healthy and equitable food system. For more information, reach out to Co-Director Susan Lightfoot Schempf, [susan.schempf@winrock.org](mailto:susan.schempf@winrock.org).

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We'd like to offer our gratitude to USDA staff, in the Commodity Procurement and Transportation and Marketing divisions of AMS in particular, for both their extraordinary effort in creating and implementing this program, and their continual support of Wallace Center as we worked with the contractors and compiled this report. We are so grateful for your partnership. Secondly, this research and technical assistance would have been impossible without the commitment and brilliance of our external partners, Evan Smith of Alden Services and Kate Fitzgerald of Fitzgerald Canepa. Finally, and most importantly, we are eternally grateful for and so deeply inspired by the contractors who shared their stories, ideas, time, and dedication to making the food system work better for all of us. You all are heroes and we hope we did you justice!

## SURVEYED CONTRACTORS

Willing Hands Norwich, VT  
Zone 7, LLC Ringoes, NJ  
Aggrigator, Inc. Watsonville, CA  
North Alabama Agriplex Cullman, AL  
GrowFood Carolina Charleston SC  
A & H Farm Manhattan, KS  
Eastern Market Partnership Detroit, MI  
Juniper Hill Farms LLC Lawrence, KS  
North Coast Opportunities / MendoLake Food Hub Ukiah, CA  
ALL Holding Company, LLC. Souderton, PA  
Riverside Unified School District Food Hub Riverside, CA  
Fresh Approach Oakland, CA  
Mālama Kaua'i Lihue, HI  
Lake County Community Development Corp Ronan, MT  
Cecarellis Harrison Hill Farm, LLC. Northford, CT  
Mycoterra Farm South Deerfield, MA  
Willimantic Food Coop Willimantic, CT  
The Berry Man, Inc. Santa Barbara, CA  
Inland Northwest Farmers Market Association Spokane, WA  
Fossil Creek Farms, LLC. Fort Collins, CO  
The Common Market Philadelphia, PA  
Gourmet Gorilla Chicago, IL



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