

## **COVID-19 Response for Maine Farmers**

The state of Maine effectively shut down in mid-March of 2020. UMaine Extension programs were canceled or pivoted to virtual platforms. New guidelines, grants, and regulations were being released daily, creating a significant challenge: How do we keep farmers in the loop and up-to-date as the country tried to cope with the start of the pandemic?

## **Educational Objectives**

Use available technologies to inform farmers and stakeholders of the current rules and regulations on farming and the impact on those rules and regulations on farmers in Maine.

## **Program Activities**

### **Virtual Programs with Zoom**

The Daily Maine Farmer Zoom was started on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020 at 10:00am by UMaine Extension as a way for farmers and farm service providers to share what is happening on their farms – what is working, what isn't working – and to find people to answer questions during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to farmers, staff from Farm Service Agency, Maine Department of Labor, and Congresswoman Pingree's Office joined early sessions to discuss the programs that their offices have for farmers and to answer farmer questions. Farms without internet access were encouraged to attend the Zoom sessions by phone, through newspaper articles and posting flyers at farm stores around the county. Throughout the sessions, the time of day and day of the week was changed to accommodate more farmers. In addition to UMaine Extension staff, presenters from Maine Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources; Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association; Maine Department of Health and Human Services; Maine Mobile Health; and Forager also participated.

In all, 18 sessions were held with a total of 413 participants, and an average of 22 participants per session. Participation in sessions with no special speaker ranged from 6 to 19. Special sessions saw higher attendance. The special session with Senator Susan Collins had 65 in attendance. The sessions with Congresswoman Chellie Pingree and MDACF Agriculture Commissioner Amanda Beal were also well attended.

### **Other Virtual and Recorded Programs**

Virtual educational programs have continued throughout 2020 and now dominate the spring. Extension staff are using live Zoom, livestream to Facebook, recorded programs, and short video clips to keep farmers informed about their options for funding, marketing, Covid-19 safety, as well as production information.

Online agriculturally oriented programs include:

- [COVID-19 Guidance to Protect Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Health](#) - 95
- [COVID-19 Lessons Learned to Date and Prepare for the Harvest Season](#) - 65
- [COVID-19 Guidance and Best Practices for Selling Seedlings](#) -218
- [COVID-19 Guidance for U-Pick Operations](#) -96
- Maple Events during COVID

### **Weekly/ Bi-weekly Maine Farm Newsletter**

Two monthly agriculture-oriented newsletters for general farming and beef production were combined into a bi-weekly newsletter that carried information for grants and new guidance to farmers. Guidance on how to manage customers in direct marketing situations at a farm stand, farmers' market and pick-your-own were included. COVID-19 Maine Farmer Surveys developed with Maine Farmer Resource Network (MFRN) were included to assess the impact of the pandemic on farmers and identify needs.

Attached pdf of this newsletter: [February 20, 2021 issue.](#)

### **Website Development**

The [Daily/ Weekly Maine Farm Zoom](#) website was developed as a portal to participate in the Maine Farm Zoom sessions. The website showed upcoming guests and provided access to chat notes from previous Zoom sessions.

[E-commerce and Other Alternative Marketing Ideas](#) was built as an informational website to house webinars related to online marketing and developing an online presence through social media. The site also included a listing of individuals in Maine that were willing to assist farmers one-on-one to develop their online marketing plan.

[Maine Farm and Seafood Directory](#) was developed and released in the first week of the pandemic. This resource is intended to link farmers to consumers looking to buy directly from Maine producers. The site currently lists over 490 farms.

Attached pdf of this site.

### **Publication Development and Updates**

With increased demand for accurate, up-to-date information a number of UMaine Extension agriculture-oriented publications were developed or updated.

- [Bulletin #2517, Maine Maple Tours: Guidance During COVID-19](#)
- [Bulletin #2516 Managing Garden Center and On-Farm Sales Safely in Maine: Best Practices and Recommendations for Marketing During COVID-19](#)

- [Bulletin #2515 Managing Farmers Market Seedling Sales Safely in Maine: Best Practices and Recommendations for Marketing During COVID-19](#)

## Teaching Methods

Teaching methods used during the past year to connect with farmers and stakeholders include:

- Synchronous virtual sessions with speaker panels and audience participation
- Recorded, asynchronous sessions to increase access to information
- Electronic newsletters sent to current UMaine Extension clientele
- Website enhancement to provide increased access to production information
- Addition of new publications to the UMaine Publications Catalog

## Results

The number of educational sessions, materials, videos, and other resources that were developed were tallied. And the number of clientele that participated in sessions, viewed materials, videos and other resources were also assessed.

### Virtual Programs with Zoom

In total, 19 sessions of the Maine Farm Zoom were held in 2020. These sessions were attended by 403 participants.

By June, attendance at the weekly meetings had waned as field work took precedence. Other virtual program recordings had 474 views.

### Website Development

The three websites mentioned above had 192,264 views in the past year. The Maine Farms and Seafood Directory currently lists over 490 farms.

### E-newsletters

Thirty (30) issues of the Maine Farm News weekly (bi-weekly since March 18, 2020) were sent out to 2,697 people. Twenty-nine percent (29%) of emails were opened and 17% clicked on at least one link. Among the most commonly clicked-on links were those listing sources of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) for farmers to and links to COVID-19 related loans/grants.

An important part of the e-newsletter were three COVID-19 Maine Farmer Surveys. These surveys measured how farms were doing and gave farmers the opportunity to share the difficulties they were experiencing during the pandemic. Surveys were also distributed to member organizations of MFRN and had 327 responses.

- [FIRST COVID-19 Maine Farmer Survey Data Analysis](#)
- [SECOND COVID-19 Maine Farmer Survey Data Analysis](#)

- [THIRD COVID-19 Maine Farmer Survey Data Analysis](#)

## **Publications**

We wrote three COVID-19 guidance-oriented publications during this past year that received 739 hits. An article on COVID-19 and the Maine Food system is currently under review.

## **Evaluation**

A survey of Weekly Maine Farm Zoom was conducted, but of the 143 surveys sent out only 3 responses (2%) were received. As a result, it was decided to put this program on hiatus. The sessions were brought when there was a need, such as how to manage migrant workers.

A newsletter survey in June found that twice a month frequency would satisfy 80% of the respondents. Respondents wanted: breaking news, meetings, and resources. Surveys were not a top pick and yet achieved a majority of the clicks when included in the newsletter.

## **Impact Statement**

Senator Susan Collins' office reported in December 2020 that Maine farmers received more than \$50 million in Covid-19 financial relief through the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) that was created under the CARES Act<sup>1</sup>. Information on CFAP and the CARES Act was regularly included in the Weekly Farm Zoom, Weekly/Bi-weekly Maine Farm e-Newsletter, and special virtual programs.

<https://extension.umaine.edu/piscataquis/people/donna-rae-coffin-ms/>

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<sup>1</sup> More Than \$50 Million in COVID-19 Financial Relief has been Awarded to Maine Farmers, Susan Collins Newsroom, Dec. 11, 2020. <https://www.collins.senate.gov/newsroom/more-50-million-covid-19-financial-relief-has-been-awarded-maine-farmers>