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Change, Adaptability, & Resilience

How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the US food chain over the next few years?

Never before has the United States, nor the world, been gripped by a pandemic in a time of such remarkable food chain globalization. Consequently, an immense amount of fresh knowledge has been gained over the course of this unforgettable and, yes, unprecedented year. Change is nearly always inevitable, particularly in a sector and system that is already constantly adapting to changes in consumer preference, technology, and the environment. Therefore, we can absolutely expect to see the US food chain continue to change. With that said, the next few years will present a pace of change rarely seen in the global food value chain.

Of course, as our interconnected world and the United States continue to manage the impacts of the pandemic, due to the nature of COVID-19, labor-intensive food value chains are likely to experience the most disruptions. In the western United States, growers of non-staple, non-row crops of vegetables, fruits, etc. will need to show the most resilience. On the other hand, the agricultural Great Plains region of the US, though economically challenged for different reasons, will see fewer COVID-19-related disruptions because of its innately capital-intensive production. Perhaps the most resilient link in the US food chain is that of retailers. Grocery stores and other food retailers will continue to garner the most profit in the food chain and perhaps enhance their prowess as online sales in the past year depict an irreversible trend upward.

From a consumer perspective, there will be increases in the prices of some foods, shifts toward more at-home cooking, and an unfortunate change in food demand as millions of people grapple with loss of income and a long-term economic fallout. Amidst this sorely upsetting year, there was a positive change, as described by USDA Under Secretary Greg Ibach in a Farm Journal seminar, that encouraged people who were traditionally detached from agriculture to give the source of their food a second thought. Consumers drive agricultural production in numerous ways and their thoughts and beliefs toward the source of their food is an important one. Therefore, it does not require much effort to see the chance for an altered relationship between consumers and producers. Former California Secretary of Agriculture Kawamura in a separate Farm Journal seminar discussed the desire consumers have to connect with the farmers, ranchers, and producers of their food. In Kansas, a cattleman established a direct-to-consumer program when the pandemic first began to take its toll on the national food supply chain. The program exploded in popularity and food chain experts should not be surprised to see more of these uniquely adaptive strategies by producers to fill the gap over the next few years.

If COVID-19 has taught us anything about the US food system, it is that our linkages and supply chains are delicate and vulnerable, but, nonetheless, resilient beyond comparison. While a developed country like the US is not likely to experience food shortages anytime soon, a lack of choice might inconvenience some consumers. There are many opportunities presenting themselves now to think globally and act locally. Despite, or perhaps because of, our globalized world, it is incredibly important to use the next few years to intertwine technological and socio-economic recoveries into the world of agriculture. This work of recovery and increased resilience cannot be done in isolation, especially in the US food chain. In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the rate of change, highlighted unique and local adaptability to challenges, and ushered in a new appreciation and demand for resilience in the US food chain. The next few years will challenge us all to see problems as possibilities.