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Communicating about food and farming during COVID-19

Communicating about food and farming to the non-farming public is often complicated but the current COVID-19 pandemic has made explaining the system even more confusing and here's just a few examples why:

- There's news articles about milk being disposed of on farm – yet milk sales are limited in many grocery stores;
- Egg supply is constant across Canada – but eggs are also in short supply in grocery stores;
- There isn't enough capacity at meat processing plants across Canada and farmers' worries about their inability to get animals to market have been the focus of many news stories.
- Growers are citing the need for the essential skills brought by seasonal workers – while thousands of Canadians are out of work.
- Mountains of vegetables are without markets with the restaurant sector in business.
- And the list goes on and on.

If you are drawn into conversations online about the food system or asked to do a media interview, take the opportunity to tell your side of the story. Canadian consumers, for the most part, have never seen empty store shelves or panic-buying behaviour. It's up to us to explain the complexities of a system that, in normal times, appears to work seamlessly. As such, when there are challenges like are being faced currently, they're even more evident.

Be gentle, understanding and reasonable when trying to offer an explanation for these short-term disturbances in our supply chain and the challenges that farmers are facing to raise livestock and produce crops in these unusual times. The average consumer doesn't understand the supply chain – and all the moving parts that affect it. It's up to us to help them understand without judging their lack of knowledge. And, it's up to us to emphasize the critical role agriculture is playing in this crisis - without terrifying consumers into thinking there may be no food left to buy.

It's also a great time to highlight all of the initiatives that are happening across Canada by the thousands of people working in the food system. Donations of huge quantities of milk, eggs, meat, vegetables and cash to food banks; growers donating thousands of bouquets of flowers to communities because they didn't have an Easter market to sell them; drive by tractor parades in many communities with farmers thanking health care workers. The role of farmers, agribusinesses and food processors has never been more essential and more evident – and these good news stories need to be told.

Above all, we need to keep reassuring consumers that the agri-food sector is doing its best to respond quickly and ensure the availability of high quality, safe and affordable food – while not straying from the values that are important to Canadians in the process (e.g. animal welfare, ethical labour, food prices, environmental stewardship and more).

There are a number of resources available if you are looking for speaking points for crafting your social media points or interview topics:

- Many commodity groups have web pages devoted to discussions of COVID-19 and its impact on their specific industries. The Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association, as an example, has a [resource section](#) that explains the critical role that seasonal workers play in producing Canadian fruits and vegetables.
- The [Canadian Food Focus website](#) has some great articles of late on such topics as the security of Canada's meat supply, why dairy farmers are dumping milk and whether you can catch COVID-19 from food (the quick answer is no).
- An [ambassador tool kit of resources](#) on Farm & Food Care Ontario's website contains fact sheets on social media, how to work with the media, how to create solid agricultural messaging and more.

If you are asked to do a media interview, take time to prepare. Returning the call or setting an appointment to do the interview is the best strategy. It allows you to collect your information and your thoughts. Also pay careful thought to anything you're putting on social media. Look at it from a consumer view to see if the information you're portraying accurately reflects the industry.

Farm & Food Care is here to help. We offer phone coaching before interviews and in recent weeks, have done a couple of online media training sessions to boards of directors being asked to do media interviews on breaking issues related to COVID-19. Email info@farmfoodcare.org and we'd be pleased to help you with your communications about your industry and the pandemic's effects on it.