

The pandemic pivot two years later

Four Ontario farmers share their experiences

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When COVID-19 plunged the world into a collective lockdown two years ago, business ground to a halt for some. For others, demand skyrocketed in ways they'd never imagined, leaving them scrambling to keep up amidst pandemic restrictions and shortages.

Four Ontario farmers shared their experiences at the Farm & Food Care Ontario annual conference with how they handled the overnight change in how they do business, new needs to keep workers and customers safe, and how they've come out the other end as the world begins to learn how to live with COVID-19 on a more long-term basis.

Erin McLean, McLean Berry Farms, Lakefield

McLean Berry Farms is a pick your own operation that also sells wholesale to local grocery stores and participates in six farmers markets. In March 2020, the McLeans were planning their annual maple syrup festival, but the day before the festival's start, they cancelled the event even though no official shutdowns had yet been announced.

"In my gut, I knew it was the right thing to do. Instead of fixating on the crisis, we went to how we can find solutions, how can we make this work?" McLean said. "We threw

ourselves into buying new wash and sanitizing stations and finding PPE and when the (local) health unit said we weren't an essential service, and we couldn't open, we went to various farm organizations to have pick your own declared essential."

They set up an online store and offered customers the option of picking up orders at the farm or at farmers' markets, something they're going to continue with. And instead of their traditional wagon rides to the fields for picking, they transitioned to a drive-in park and pick – all part of their efforts to keep everyone as safe as possible. They also really pushed their wholesale business to make up for lost event revenue.

"A lot of our biggest short-term strategies have turned into long-term strategies. Being versatile and flexible saved us," she said.

She's very proud that their farm's 2020 sales were only \$34 different than the year before – and that was without being able to hold their two large annual festivals – and their 2021 numbers were up too. The community is eager for the festivals to return so the McLeans are looking at how they can satisfy their customers while meeting the needs of their business and family.

Kevin Snyder, Snyder Heritage Farms, Bloomindale

Snyder Heritage Farms in Waterloo Region is active in maple syrup, turkey and cash crop production. A small on-farm store is open two days a week and there is a wholesale business too. As a smaller



Marianne Edwards, left, Kevin Snyder and Mike Buis participate in a farmer panel at the Farm & Food Care annual conference, with Erin McLean, top right, joining the presentation virtually.

operation, their labour consists of family with no outside employees.

"Maple syrup season is about four weeks in the spring that is a blur, so I didn't really realize what was going on until I tried to go to Home Depot for some parts and everything was locked down," Snyder recalled.

Their small farm store, cosy in pre-pandemic times, quickly created physical distancing challenges. So, they set up a small booth outside the original store to serve people safely, and like with many farms who sell direct-to-consumer, the Snyders quickly saw a huge increase in new customers. As well, existing customers were buying more, which created challenges in making sure they were able to produce enough to satisfy the increased demand.

"The positives have outweighed the negatives. There have been some struggles but nothing we couldn't overcome, and I

now have enough containers for two years of maple syrup on hand," he chuckled. "You take the positives and go forward with that, like the new customer base that we created."

Mike Buis, Buis Beef and Bloomfield Feed Company, Chatham

Mike and Joanne Buis run Buis Beef, growing vegetables and field crops and raising beef to sell from the farm. An equine health and wellness centre that their daughter runs is also part of their family businesses, and mid-pandemic, they added a new venture to the mix when they opened Bloomfield Feed Company.

"When the pandemic first hit, we were on horseback during calving season. We needed to decide moving forward how the business will look," Buis said. "We had to keep the wheels turning as an essential service, and it was a real juggling act to figure out what we needed

to do and all the pieces that need to be put in place."

An immediate focus became cross-training, switching more of their processes to digital, and implementing more sharing between their different businesses. The team was kept busy staying on top of orders that were now coming in by email and phone and doing deliveries.

Luckily, their freezer beef business was long-established, and they booked hook space a year in advance to keep up to burgeoning demand for local beef. They also worked with two different abattoirs so operations could keep going if there was a shut down or someone was sick.

"There was a huge push to backyard farmers, so we sold chicken, feed, and waterers, and coached them on how to raise and about booking slaughter space," he said. "We were able to leap our businesses forward through COVID, get our name out there and move our products. It has worked out very well."

Marianne Edwards, Sheldon Creek Dairy, Loretto

Marianne Edwards is the operations and marketing manager at Sheldon Creek Dairy, where her family farms 600 acres, milks 75 cows and processes fluid milk, yogurt and other dairy products in their on-farm facility. They sell their dairy products via wholesale distribution and through their on-farm store.

Flexibility was the name of the game when COVID

hit. They quickly shut down their small farm store and launched a new online shop so customers could order ahead for parking lot pick up. People who came to the farm without pre-ordering could place their order using a wipeable order board, and as requests for new products grew, the Sheldon Creek Dairy offering rapidly expanded to include flour, cheese, eggs and other staples they sourced from other local producers.

"We had to become innovative in our thinking and listen to our customers," Edwards said. "COVID made you realize it was about co-petition and competition – our customers will shop wherever they are and if your product is there, they will buy it."

"We began a lot of partnerships with others, and it is a proud moment of COVID to see that collaboration."

Those partnerships included offering space on their delivery trucks to other local producers to supply farm markets and other existing Sheldon Creek customers looking to expand their product lines. Key for the Sheldon Creek team, though, noted Edwards, was being flexible and looking for opportunities, being mindful of mental health and wellness, and having a network to reach out to.

"COVID has brought food to the forefront for many people, but it also brought to the forefront the fragile state of food security," she said, adding now the industry must work at keeping food as a top-of-mind priority.

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Kiwi cheese costs more than Australian

New Zealand shoppers are finding cheese prices are almost double the price charged in Australia.

New Zealand is considered the lowest-cost and greatest exporter of dairy products in the world, yet its domestic shoppers pay higher prices.

A spokesman for Fonterra, which holds a monopoly on New Zealand dairy exports, said part of the reason is that the country exports about 95 per cent of production, but Australia about 30 per cent.

Fonterra also pegs the price it pays farmers for

milk to a global index.

Whatever the reasons, consumers find that a Countdown-branded one-kilogram package of Tasty Cheese was sold for \$18.50 in New Zealand, but sold for \$10 in Australia.

The Kiwis said the cheeses are different.

But Mainland tasty cheese was the same in both New Zealand and in Australia, but was still \$6.60 cheaper across the Tasman.

A 500-gram block of Mainland cheese, a Fonterra brand, sells for \$14 in New Zealand and \$8.25 in Australia.

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