

To: Ralph Northam, Governor, Virginia
Bettina Ring, Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry
Jewel Bronaugh, Commissioner, Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
Jeffrey C. McKay, Chairman, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
Penelope A. Gross, Vice Chairman, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
James R. Walkinshaw, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
John W. Foust, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
Walter L. Alcorn, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
Rodney L. Lusk, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
Daniel G. Storck, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
Dalia A. Palchik, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
Pat Herrity, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
Kathy L. Smith, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
Kirk Kincannon, Executive Director, Fairfax County Parks Authority

Re: Executive Order 53: Farmers' Markets Are Like Grocery Stores

March 31, 2020

Dear Governor Northam, Secretary Ring, Commissioner Bronaugh, Chairman McKay, and the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors,

As Virginia grapples with the serious implications of the coronavirus, we appreciate the thoughtful but aggressive approach the Governor's administration and Fairfax County have taken to ensure the safety of Virginians during this frightening and uncertain time. We understand that we must strike a balance between social distancing to ensure public health and allowing Virginians to access essential items, such as food. As growers and producers who sell food at farmers' markets, not grocery stores, we ask that you reconsider the details of application of Executive Order 53 to farmers' markets.

Everyone needs access to food. This is why the Governor's order recognizes grocery stores as essential services that must continue to operate during this time. Some farmers sell produce to grocery stores, but most do not do so for reasons ranging from philosophical to financial to pragmatic. Farmers' markets are a major outlet for the agricultural products that we grow, and while consumers are struggling to find fresh produce and locally grown meat in stores, we have that meat and produce on hand and available to sell. Farmers' markets are as essential a source of healthy, local food as grocery stores, and the recent designation of farmers' markets in Virginia as restaurants overlooks that fact. Further, that designation places untenable restrictions on markets and doesn't allow markets to make the necessary adaptations, in the ways that grocery stores have, to keep vendors and customers safe. Making a distinction between grocery stores and farmers' markets is arbitrary, and it hurts both vendors and customers.

In fact, the markets are essential businesses that can be safer than supermarkets, and can manage social distancing for both vendors and customers. At markets in DC and Maryland, farmers have redesigned their sales areas to keep people safe on both sides of the table. In Virginia, farmers are being encouraged or directed to limit sales to pre-orders, or drive-through sales only in an effort to reduce crowding. While that logic translates to restaurants, it does not translate to farmers' markets: drive-through capacity is inconsistent with the physical set-up of markets, and vendors rely on foot-traffic, which is not conducive to customers calling ahead. While farmers appreciate the need to adapt for safety purposes, this framework simply doesn't apply to markets as it does for restaurants.

Markets are inherently efficient as a means of purveying fresh agricultural products. We can find more ways to protect both customers and farmers (packaging all food, keeping it behind the counter) without imposing a clunky framework that fits the market business model so poorly. Pre-ordering is a wrong fit for the farmers' market model and puts all the burden on the farmer - and farmers are already stretched to their limit, growing and transporting their products to market. Setting up early ordering adds a significant new burden to farmers. Unlike restaurants, we are not equipped with the infrastructure to receive and fill orders from our farmers' market stall. We rely on foot traffic, so we don't have lists of customers to notify or solicit to place orders. We have small crews dealing with fresh-picked produce who will have to stay up late to organize and pack these orders. While these are challenging but reasonable adaptations for restaurants, they're stifling and impractical for farmers.

We are asking that you support the farmers in our region who are providing fresh, locally produced food -- keep the farmers markets open in a manner that is as close to normal as possible, with social distancing requirements and other safety measures that take into account the way these markets operate. Customers are frantically trying to figure out how to get our goods, and the safest and most economically viable way to do that is to maintain the market system and help us to improve our systems to keep everyone safe.

Sincerely,

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