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How the pandemic is transforming **the nation's hunger relief system** – for better and for worse

THE HUNGER



By **SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN**
Capital Press

Half an hour before hunger relief volunteers opened a mobile food distribution site at Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Ore., dozens of cars had already lined up to wait. At 4 p.m., Marion Polk Food Share volunteers started loading boxes into trunks. It was a hot July afternoon. Muscles and faces shone with sweat. Within 20 minutes, volunteers put nearly 180 boxes — 4,500 pounds of farm-fresh food — into people's cars. They still had an hour and forty minutes to go.

According to Feeding America, more than 54 million people in the U.S. are facing hunger during the pandemic: more than at the peak of the Great Recession, and staggering closer to the Great Depression, when historians estimate 60 million Americans went hungry.

As of June, according to a new analysis by the Brookings Institution based on Census Bureau data, 1-in-6 children lack a reliable source of affordable food. Some states have it worse; Idaho Foodbank told the Capital Press 1-in-4 children is likely not getting enough to eat.

Farmers, processors, food banks and governments are working to fill the gap. But experts say COVID-19 has “upended” how hunger relief

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A line of cars waits at a Washington state food bank during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second Harvest



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press
Rick Gaupo, CEO and president of Marion Polk Food Share.



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press
A worker fills and moves boxes at Marion Polk Food Share.



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press
A volunteer talks to a driver at a food distribution site.

Oregon cherry growers weather rains, COVID-19 during harvest

Most of state's crop comes from Wasco County orchards

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
Capital Press

THE DALLES, Ore. — This year's cherry harvest began with a double dose of uncertainty at Polehn Farms in the Columbia River Gorge. First, rain fell just a few days before picking started June 10, raising concerns over fruit cracking due to excessive water uptake.

Then, with the coronavirus pandemic spreading, the farm did not hear right away from its usual crews of migrant field workers.

Despite the challenges, Oregon cherry growers say they remain optimistic as harvest winds down. Solid prices have helped offset smaller pack-out of some varieties for fresh markets and higher costs to comply with COVID-19 worker protections.



Polehn Farms grows about 430 acres of cherries near The Dalles, Ore., and operates a packing house. The Mid-Columbia region has more than 82% of Oregon's 14,884 total cherry acreage, split mostly between Wasco and Hood River counties.

Jeanette Gryder, human resources and accounts manager at Polehn Farms, said they typically receive calls from workers to reserve cabins at the farm in April and May, but this year the calls came later than usual.

When they finally did, they were able to hire crews within the first 3-4 days after the camps opened June 5, she said.

“People were wanting to work, and willing to do what needed to be done to work,” Gryder said.

That led to the industry's next challenge — how to safely house hundreds of workers living and sleeping in the camps during the eight-week harvest while stopping the spread of COVID-19.

The state's Occupational Safety and Health Administration issued temporary rules in April requiring labor-intensive farms to provide more portable restrooms, hand

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Small tractor sales surge during pandemic

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

Sales of small farm machinery are benefiting from increased home-and-yard spending during the coronavirus outbreak, but the pandemic's impact on larger equipment is uneven.

The 102,000 new tractors under 40 horsepower sold during the first half of 2020 is about 13% higher than a year ago, according to the Association of Equipment Manufacturers.

The trend has only seemed to pick up steam recently, with AEM reporting that unit sales in the smallest tractor category surged 37% last month



Courtesy Kubota

Sales of small tractors have surged during COVID-19 shutdowns while the impact on other size categories of farm machinery has been uneven.

compared to a year ago. “Anything that has to do with home improvement or making your home more enjoyable — all those busi-

nesses seem to be doing well,” said Curt Blades, senior vice president of agricultural services for AEM.

Dealers of building mate-

rials, garden equipment and supplies saw their sales increase about 10% during the first half of 2020, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The solid market for small tractors is especially remarkable because this category had already seen healthy sales for several years, Blades said.

These smallest tractors are usually bought by hobby farmers and large property owners, while the 40- to 100-horsepower tractors more commonly used for farm chores, livestock and light tillage in commercial agriculture, he said.

“For the most part, that's someone who's deriving income from the farm or sig-

nificant income from the farm,” Blades said.

Sales of new tractors in the 40-100 horsepower category rose 6.6% during the first half of 2020 and 27.5% last month, which is likely due to the need to replace machinery rather than optimism about the agricultural market outlook, he said.

Despite the uncertainty caused by the coronavirus and tensions over biofuels and trade, farmers realize they're in business for the long haul and likely have pent-up demand for mid-sized replacement equipment, Blades said.

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