

# FARM FRESH FOOD BOX

## 2019 TOOLKIT

Boxes of locally grown, seasonal produce without the commitment of a full season subscription



Jane Kolodinsky<sup>1</sup>, Marilyn Sitaker<sup>2</sup>, Lisa Chase<sup>1</sup>, Hans Estrin<sup>1</sup>,  
Diane Smith<sup>3</sup>, Julia Van Soelen Kim<sup>4</sup>, Weiwei Wang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Vermont <sup>2</sup>The Evergreen State College <sup>3</sup>Washington State University Extension <sup>4</sup>University of California Cooperative Extension

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## OVERVIEW

How does F3B work?  
Motivation at the Food Systems Level

02

## WHAT'S IN IT FOR FARMERS & RETAILERS?

04

## CHALLENGES FOR FARMERS & RETAILERS

05

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

NERCRD Data  
Market Survey

06

## ACTION TEMPLATES

Goals for Farmers/Retailers  
Matchmaking and Planning Checklist  
F3B Logistics  
Marketing Plan  
Marketing Check-in  
Troubleshooting Guide  
Customer Sheet

13

## REFERENCES & RESOURCES

21

# OVERVIEW

## HOW DOES F3B WORK?

Farm Fresh Food Boxes are Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) style<sup>1</sup> boxes of produce customers can order and pick up at local convenience stores or small grocers, without the commitment of a season-long subscription. We asked shoppers to share their opinion of this new way to buy fruit and vegetables as part of a national survey of locally grown foods.

### PRE-SEASON



#### EXTENSION

- Engages retailers & Farmers
- Provides FFFB materials

#### FARMERS

- Receive FFFB boxes & stickers
- Complete demographic survey

#### RETAILERS

- Receive flyers, sandwich boards & white boards
- Receive customer order pads
- Receive training on the trackers from extension team
- Complete demographic survey

### DURING GROWING SEASON



#### EXTENSION & RESEARCH

- Ongoing technical support

#### FARMERS

- Tells retailer weekly box contents
- Puts customer survey in box
- Receives orders from store, packs boxes, delivers to store

#### RETAILERS

- Display promotional materials—flyers, sandwich boards & white boards
- Takes orders, collects payments
- Relays weekly orders to farmer
- Distributes boxes

### POST-SEASON



#### EXTENSION

- Supports data collection
- Pays participants stipends

#### FARMERS

- Participates in post-season interviews with researchers

#### RETAILERS

- Participates in post-season interviews with researchers
- Receives 10% of box sales from FFFB extension team

<sup>1</sup>In a traditional CSA, subscribers purchase a “share” of the farmer’s harvest, provide an up-front payment, and receive a weekly box of produce throughout the growing season.



## MOTIVATION AT THE FOOD SYSTEMS LEVEL

Regionally-grown foods sold in the U.S. through venues such as farmers' markets, farm stands and Community Supported Agriculture subscriptions have increased in the past few decades. But recent trends indicate a levelling off in direct-to-consumer (DTC) sales.

In some areas, stagnant sales may be due to market saturation. Other factors include the rise in meal kits and groceries sold online, along with increased availability of locally grown foods in traditional grocery stores and supermarkets. For rural retailers, a shift in consumer habits has increased shopping at big box stores in neighboring larger cities, leading to grocery store closures in rural communities.

In response to these trends, farmers are seeking ways to adapt their business model to reach new customers. For example, CSA

farmers are exploring business expansion strategies such as adding value-added products; offering flexibility in share frequency, payment plans, and item selection; using electronic purchasing and other e-commerce marketing tools; partnering with institutional health and wellness programs; collaborating with food hubs and multi-farm systems to increase scale and scope; and employing season extension technologies (See *Community supported agriculture: New models for changing markets* under References).

“Farm Fresh Food Boxes (F3B) is an innovation approach designed to open new markets for farmers and rural retailers, while improving access to healthy, affordable food in food deserts.”



# WHAT'S IN IT FOR FARMERS & RETAILERS?

Most consumers want easy access to fresh and affordable local produce, yet few expect to find it at a convenience or general store. Since F3B is new and different, it takes dedication and persistence to launch and promote among potential customers. Is it worth a try? Many retailers and farmers say yes! F3B can potentially provide many benefits in places where there is a need for better food access, along with a good match between farmer, retailer, and customer.

## Benefit to Farmers

F3B attracts customers who don't normally buy from farmer's markets or join a CSA. The model is flexible, allowing for week-to-week modifications based on what is available. F3B avoids staffing costs and unsold produce associated with farmers' markets. Farmers with existing CSAs can increase their efficiency by preparing F3Bs at the same time as the CSA boxes, and coordinating delivery to stores on existing delivery route. Finally, F3B can help a farmer retain CSA customers who need a more flexible option.

## Benefit to Retailers

F3B ordering gives shoppers a reason to visit the store, and pick up gives them a reason to come back, increasing foot traffic and possible collateral sales. Customers pick up their box on the day it's delivered, avoiding a need for cold storage, and saving time, space, and equipment costs. Retailers don't have to invest in stock or worry about spoilage, since only what is pre-sold is delivered. Thus a normal retail mark-up is not needed to cover costs, though retailers get a small percentage of the price to cover transaction costs. Finally, many retailers see F3B as an opportunity to serve the community, and add product value.

## Benefit to Shoppers

F3B are affordably priced relative to produce in a traditional retail market, CSA or Farmer's Market venue. Pre-ordering a box, whose weekly contents are posted in the store, ensures that the customer will know what items the box contains in advance. There is no large up-front payment or on-going commitment. Finally, although F3B is a new produce buying concept, it features retail sites that are familiar and acceptable to consumers, adds one-stop shopping convenience for complementary products, with locations that are open daily, and offer longer hours for pickup than a typical CSA.



# CHALLENGES FOR FARMERS & RETAILERS

## Potential barriers to a smooth F3B launch

As with any new endeavor that requires people coordinate on logistical details, the launch of F3B will certainly provide challenges for both farmers and retailers. The following list outlines typical challenges experienced by farmers and retailers starting to sell F3B.



### FARMERS

- + Retail locations that are not along the usual delivery routes add mileage, which can cost the farmer time and money. This may offset potential benefits of F3B, especially if box sales are low.
- + Though farmers can typically plan and schedule the weekly harvest, it may be difficult or stressful for them to provide a F3B produce list four days before actual harvest, especially if they are not used to doing so that far in advance.



### RETAILERS

- + Often, small retail stores are high-paced operations with few staff managing many details. F3B is yet another system to remember, another ball for staff to juggle. If the retailer has a high staff turnover, the challenge is compounded. Training new staff is a large investment, and F3B will only steepen the learning curve.
- + The retailer must remember to tally orders for the week and notify the farmer of the weekly box total, in addition to managing transaction logistics.
- + Tracking F3B payments can be complicated: For example, because boxes can be paid for with either cash or credit, a retailer may have difficulty tracking credit card transaction fees. This means the retailer could lose 2-3% of the box sale to that fee, and have no way to recoup the loss.
- + Purchasing F3B with SNAP/EBT (Food Stamps), is difficult, though not impossible. This can limit the use of SNAP/EBT -- a disadvantage to lower income F3B consumers.

# RESEARCH FINDINGS

## NERCRD INDICATORS

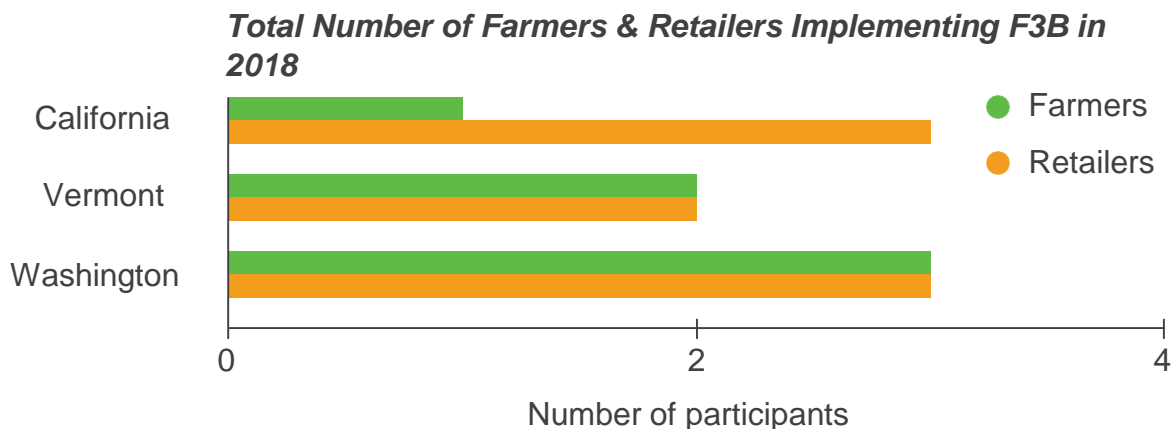
In 2018, the Farm Fresh Food Boxes project received a grant to test four community economic development indicators developed by the North East Regional Center for Rural Development (NERCRD). These indicators are designed to ascertain the degree to which specific Extension programs are making a difference in communities being served. Indicators quantify the how many farms and rural retailers made business improvements as a result of Extension technical assistance, the number of businesses and jobs retained, and the number of unpaid labor hours spent on F3B implementation.



### Number of Farm and Retail Businesses Making Changes in Marketing or Business Management

Indicator #8 is defined as the number of **farmers** and **rural retailers** who, as a result of Extension outreach, coaching, and technical support, made changes in their marketing plans and strategies by adopting the F3B marketing innovation, and using the new recordkeeping system to track F3B weekly sales and collateral sales.

As indicated in the graphic below, a total of six farmers and eight retailers across three states incorporated F3B in their marketing plans and strategies in 2018.





## Number of Unpaid/Volunteer Hours

Each state's farmers noted the amount of additional unpaid or volunteer farm labor hours implementing F3B required over the course of the season. None of the retailers in the three states, however, had any unpaid staff.



In general, Farmers and Retailers were interested in expanding their business by introducing F3B. Most reported a positive experience implementing the new model.

### why try the F3B MODEL?

“My main interest was to access a new customer base that was... where the store is and in that neighborhood...”

-Vermont Farmer



### how is the overall EXPERIENCE?

“The produce was always really good quality and... a lot of people... felt like it was a pretty good value...”

-Washington Retailer



action  
indicator

#1

## Number of Unpaid/Volunteer Hours

Each state's farmers were asked to report the number of additional unpaid or volunteer farm labor hours required by F3B during the season. None of the retailers in the three states had any unpaid staff, but farmer reports are shown below:



### California

Farmers said F3B required about 2-3 extra hours



### Vermont

Farmers noted an increase, which Extension later estimated to be on par with that of CA farmers



### Washington

Farmers noted F3B required a total increase of about 12 hours

action  
indicator

#18

## Number of Firms Retained

All F3B farms and rural stores were still in business at the end of 2018. Farmers said F3B enhanced or strengthened their business by opening new markets. Store owners felt F3B had a negligible business impact in its year, though one Vermont retailer thought it had potential .

how has F3B impacted  
**FARMERS?**

“ It's maybe given us a little bit more exposure... That's what business means to us, is connecting with more people. ”

-California Farmer



how has F3B benefit  
**RETAILERS?**

“ I think... it maybe added a little something that other people don't have. ”

-Vermont Retailer



## Number of Jobs Retained

Indicator #19 was defined as the number of existing jobs at risk of being moved or eliminated that were protected by actions taken with critical input from Extension programs.

During the year in which F3B was implemented, there were no new jobs or jobs at risk of elimination. None of the F3B farms and rural stores hired new staff or noted an increase in paid labor hours for staff as a result of F3B implementation. Most noted a negligible amount of time initially to train staff in the following procedures:



taking  
orders



receiving box  
deliveries



communicating  
with the farmer

how is the process of training  
**THE STAFF?**

“[It was just a matter of reminding staff of] the few little details that they are supposed to pay attention to... and that extra time of recording and putting things where they need to go, but not much.”

-Vermont Farmer



## WHAT WOULD ENCOURAGE A SHOPPER TO TRY A FARM FRESH FOOD BOX?

The desire to support local economy, local farmers and eat locally grown, organic, seasonal foods. The listing of what will be in the food box takes away the surprise factor, and many shoppers prefer to have a choice, know what they are going to receive/purchase a food box.



54% Enjoy recipes included within their food box



36% Enjoy tasting a recipe made from box items



34% Are pleased by lightly processed produce

## WHAT WOULD DISCOURAGE A SHOPPER FROM TRYING ONE?

Shoppers may not be familiar with items included in the farm box, know how to prepare or wonder if it would be a food they would know how to prepare and enjoy eating. Some examples of locally grown foods not typically seen go to familiar foods include garlic and onion scapes, kohlrabi, and swiss chard. Farmers sometimes include recipes for these less familiar produce items which can be a bridge from farmer to shopper.



## HOW DOES DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER FOOD SHOPPING VARY BY REGION?

Overall, 79.5% said they have bought produce at a direct-to-consumer venue. Farm stand use is significantly lower in the West than the South while Farmer's Market use is lower in the West compared to the Midwest or Northeast. CSA use has no significant regional variation.

Lifetime prevalence of shopping any DTC venue by region

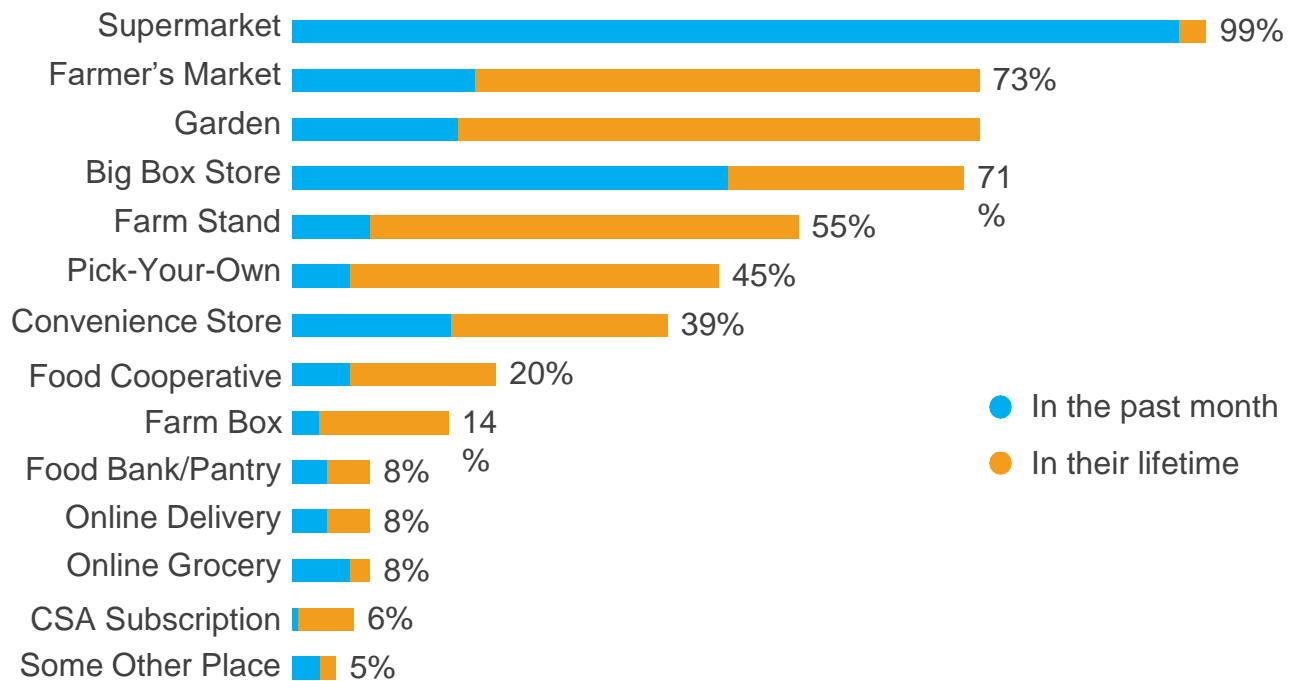




## WHERE DO PEOPLE GENERALLY BUY FRUIT AND VEGETABLES?

A farmer or retailer wanting to sell Food Boxes will find the following data about consumer attitudes and shopping habits of interest:

### Lifetime prevalence of shopping for fresh produce by venue (n=372-374)



### How often do people buy LOCAL FOODS?

Eleven percent say they buy local foods *always*, 36% buy it *often*; 37.5% buy it *sometimes*. Just 9% buy it *rarely* and 3% *never* buy it.



## WHAT MOTIVATES PEOPLE TO “BUY LOCAL”?

Wholesomeness, freshness and flavor are top reasons people buy locally grown foods. Shoppers also want to support local farms and economies. Cost, food safety, and sustainable/organic growing practices are less common motivators for buying locally-grown foods.

## WHAT DO SHOPPERS LIKE BEST ABOUT “BUYING LOCAL”?

Most shoppers at farmers’ markets, farm stands or CSAs say they feel comfortable interacting with farmers and other customers. These shoppers say that the food seems affordable and its quality makes it worth the cost. Shoppers also feel that the hours of operation and location are acceptable.

## WHAT ARE THE PERCEIVED ROADBLOCKS TO “BUYING LOCAL”?

Not being able to get preferred produce year-round is a challenge for those who buy local foods regularly—but is also mentioned as a deterrent by nearly 50% of those who don’t buy local produce at all. About 40% who don’t buy local produce cite expense and convenience as additional deterrents.

56.0% I can’t get the produce I like year-round

39.8% The produce goes bad before I can eat it

23.1% It takes time to clean, chop & store

15.7% I don’t have time to cook

4.0% Can’t get culturally appropriate produce

2.8% Local vendors don’t speak my language

# **ACTION TEMPLATES**

## **GOALS FOR FARMERS/RETAILERS**

Worksheet for farmers and retailers to document their reasons for selling Farm Fresh Food Boxes, and what the positive effects should be for their businesses.

## **MATCHMAKING AND PLANNING CHECKLIST**

Worksheet to help farmers and retailers identify potential partners, and a checklist for developing a plan.

## **DAY-TO-DAY F3B LOGISTICS**

Template for farmers and retailers to detail the logistics of a Farm Fresh Food Box

## **MARKETING PLAN**

Checklist for farmers and retailers with suggestions for marketing Food Boxes, with sections for tracking success.

## **MARKETING CHECK-IN**

Worksheet for farmers and retailers to debrief and adjust marketing plan on the fly, mid and post season.

## **TROUBLESHOOTING GUIDE**

Pitfalls to avoid and frequently asked questions for farmers and retailers.

## **CUSTOMER SHEET**

Table for retailers (or farmers if they are taking orders). This table should be filled out each week for the current Farm Fresh Food Box period, starting with the first day orders are accepted and ending with the day the boxes are picked up.



## GOALS FOR FARMERS/RETAILERS

**DIRECTIONS** Success often lies in aligning goals with practical plans and actions that work toward that goal. This template prompts farmers and retailers to articulate goals (why they want to sell F3B) and constraints, as well as list potential partners and synergistic goals.

List Goal: Why do you want to try F3B?

Describe /list constraints and expectation(s) (workable box type, delivery, time and season)

List potential partner(s)

Describe potential synergy with partner (win-wins or shared goals)



# MATCHMAKING AND PLANNING CHECKLIST

**DIRECTIONS** Use these prompts to help guide logistic planning for a Farm Fresh Food Box.

## CHECKLIST

- ☐ Identify candidate farmers and retailers, and potential partners and win-wins
- ☐ Meet with partner to describe the project, share goals, constraints
- ☐ Discuss commitment: What motivates each partner? How can they achieve their goals? What challenges do they anticipate and what do they need for success?
- ☐ Identify and agree on roles and responsibilities: Who posts list of upcoming box items and when? Who accepts payments & how - cash or credit?
- ☐ Finalize details: launch/end dates; weekly schedule & logistics; pricing & payment options; retailer transaction fee; advertising

## FARMERS, RETAILERS & PARTNERS

***Farmer Contact info and preferences (method, time, secondary, etc.)***

***Retailer Contact info and preferences (method, time, secondary, etc.)***

***Other Partners?***

## PROGRAM SPECIFICS

Program launch date:.....

Program end date:.....

Post weekly box items by ..... (day/time)

Orders taken from ....until ..... (day/time)

Farmer notified of how many orders to fill by .....(day/time)

Farmer drops off the orders at the retail location by .....(day/time)

Customers pick up by .....(day/time)

## PRICING/PAYMENT

Who accepts payments?

How do customers pay (cash, credit, SNAP)?

What is the cost per box?

How do payments go from retailer to farmer?

Will an invoice be issued?

What does the retailer receive ( e.g., a percentage of sales, a set dollar amount per week, other?)

Day-To-Day

**F3B LOGISTICS**

<b>Farmer Contact #</b>	
<b>Retailer Contact #</b>	
<b>Box type</b>	
<b>Box price</b>	
<b>Start / End date</b>	
<b>Periodicity</b>	

Weekly time-line \_\_\_\_\_

Day/ Time of Week?	Who?	Task

# MARKETING PLAN

**DIRECTIONS** Farmers and retailers will each Marketing worksheets 4 pre-season, then share them with one another and coordinate pre-season efforts. Regular check-ins throughout the season, and post-season debriefings will help identify what works best.

## CHECKLIST

- ☐ Identify target community or catchment area in advance
- ☐ Know your competition! Check out other direct-to-consumer venues selling similar products. Note their prices and price your box accordingly.
- ☐ Solicit ongoing input from your customers, informally and formally. Going forward, use this information to meet customer needs.
- ☐ Send out mailers announcing program; repeat monthly during the season.
- ☐ Write and publish articles for local news outlets
- ☐ Schedule an interview with local radio station
- ☐ Create handbills announcing the program to share with local businesses
- ☐ Identify a local food champion to spread the word by mouth
- ☐ Use social media to provide regular updates on this week's Food Box and issue payment reminders

## TARGET AUDIENCE

## MARKETING MATERIALS

## MONTHLY MAILER

- |                              |                              |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Jan | <input type="checkbox"/> Jul |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feb | <input type="checkbox"/> Aug |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mar | <input type="checkbox"/> Sep |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Apr | <input type="checkbox"/> Oct |
| <input type="checkbox"/> May | <input type="checkbox"/> Nov |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Jun | <input type="checkbox"/> Dec |

## MARKETING CHECK-IN

### MEDIA POINTS OF CONTACT

Name

Phone Number

Email

**REFLECTION:** What worked?

### NOTES

**REFLECTION:** What didn't work?

**TRY THIS** Nuggets and lessons learned?





## TROUBLESHOOTING GUIDE: FAQS & LESSONS LEARNED

**DIRECTIONS** Unexpected events happen – a delayed delivery or a box that is not picked-up – which can lead to disruption of daily routines. Anticipating different scenarios and planning for possible problems will result in satisfied customers, confident staff, and a smoother operation.

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- + **How long should the F3B be offered?** The farmer's harvest season will determine how many weeks the program will be offered, usually from late spring to late fall.
- + **What if sales are low?** Many factors will influence shoppers' interest in the F3B. The farmer determines the F3B price point, taking fair market value into consideration. The retailer provides feedback based on customer comments, which further informs pricing and produce offerings. See the Market section for ideas on how to Market F3B.
- + **How do I get the word out?** Both the farmer and the retailer have community recognition so always check with them before sending out a press release or mailer, to make sure they approve of the message, image, etc.
- + **What if a food box is delivered late?** Establish a routine; schedules are important and make for a smooth week. Three time points to schedule are (1) when the farmer will notify the retailer about which items the box will contain for the coming week's delivery, (2) the day of the week and time frame for the farmer to deliver the weekly food box to the retailer, and (3) the day and time frame for weekly customer pick-up.
- + **How do I contact the retailer/farmer?** Exchange contact information to use in case of emergencies. Text messaging and phone calls are also quick and efficient ways for farmer and retailer to communicate changes in product delivery or other schedule changes.
- + **What if a customer doesn't pick up weekly box?** When a food box is not retrieved within the designated time span, use previously obtained customer contact information to call or send a reminder text. Let the customer know what happens to the food box if pick up is missed.
- + **What if a customer wants to pay with EBT/SNAP benefits?** At this time, EBT rules do not allow for sales in advance, so EBT cannot be used to pay for pre-ordered boxes.
- + **What if the customer complains about the quality of the produce?** Ownership of the product resides with the farmer, to whom any concerns should be referred.
- + **How frequently should Extension contact farmer and retailer?** Routine check-ins throughout the season, to hear progress, provide encouragement and troubleshoot any issues that come up.

**CUSTOMER SHEET**

20

STORE NAME \_\_\_\_\_ PICK UP DATE \_\_\_\_\_

	PAYMENT	ADDITIONAL SALES
1	100	100
2	100	100
3	100	100
4	100	100
5	100	100
6	100	100
7	100	100
8	100	100
9	100	100
10	100	100
11	100	100
12	100	100
13	100	100
14	100	100
15	100	100
16	100	100
17	100	100
18	100	100
19	100	100
20	100	100
21	100	100
22	100	100
23	100	100
24	100	100
25	100	100
26	100	100
27	100	100
28	100	100
29	100	100
30	100	100
31	100	100
32	100	100
33	100	100
34	100	100
35	100	100
36	100	100
37	100	100
38	100	100
39	100	100
40	100	100
41	100	100
42	100	100
43	100	100
44	100	100
45	100	100
46	100	100
47	100	100
48	100	100
49	100	100
50	100	100
51	100	100
52	100	100
53	100	100
54	100	100
55	100	100
56	100	100
57	100	100
58	100	100
59	100	100
60	100	100
61	100	100
62	100	100
63	100	100
64	100	100
65	100	100
66	100	100
67	100	100
68	100	100
69	100	100
70	100	100
71	100	100
72	100	100
73	100	100
74	100	100
75	100	100
76	100	100
77	100	100
78	100	100
79	100	100
80	100	100
81	100	100
82	100	100
83	100	100
84	100	100
85	100	100
86	100	100
87	100	100
88	100	100
89	100	100
90	100	100
91	100	100
92	100	100
93	100	100
94	100	100
95	100	100
96	100	100
97	100	100
98	100	100
99	100	100
100	100	100

[illegible]

**CHECKS** must be written out to:  
.....

## CONTACT

# REFERENCES & RESOURCES

Listed below for your information is a limited list of references and resources that informed this participatory research.

Bailey, J. 2010. Rural grocery stores: Importance and challenges Center for Rural Affairs Rural Research and Analysis Program. Lyons, NE: Center for Rural Affairs.

Block, Daniel R., Michael Thompson, Jill Euker, Toni Liquori, Frank Fear, and Sherill Baldwin. 2008. Engagement for transformation: Value webs for local food system development. Agriculture and Human Values. doi:10.1007/s10460-008-9113-5.

BOGOs, Bounce Backs and the cost of Freebies! Promoting the Product. For Direct Marketing Farmers <https://farmsreach.com/welcome/event/bogos-bounce-backs-and-the-cost-of-freebies-promoting-the-product-for-direct-marketing-farmers/>

Building a sustainable business: a guide to developing a business plan for farms and rural businesses, (2003). Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. <https://www.sare.org/Learning-Center/Books/Building-a-Sustainable-Business>

Connor, David S., and Ralph Levine. 2016. Circles of association: The connections of community-based food systems. In Handbook of Applied System Science.

Diamond, Adam, and James Barham. 2011. Money and Mission: Moving Food with Value and Values. Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development. doi:10.5304/jafscd.2011.014.013.



United States Department of Agriculture  
National Institute of Food and Agriculture



This work is supported by Innovation for Rural Entrepreneurs and Communities project no. VT-0075CG from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.



Jane Kolodinsky, Ph.D.  
F3B Principal Investigator

Contact:

[Jane.Kolodinsky@uvm.edu](mailto:Jane.Kolodinsky@uvm.edu)

(802) 656-4616

[www.farmfreshfoodbox.org](http://www.farmfreshfoodbox.org)