

Embracing Change with New Relationships

Recent changes interrupted typical operations and regular avenues for sales at Four Oaks Farms; this short vignette is part of our “Virginia Food Systems and COVID-19 Story Collection Project” that aims to highlight, collect, and share stories of hope and resilience in our food system amidst the pandemic. Find out more about this project and view our entire series on [our website](#).

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By Hunter Hilbert

The Coronavirus pandemic took a toll on more than just the health of those infected with the virus. Many farms and business either suffered great losses or shuttered totally. In light of school and college closings across the Commonwealth of Virginia, one Franklin County farm in Wirtz, Virginia took a major hit in terms of product sales—until some new opportunities arose.

Four Oaks Farms estimated that about eighty percent of the farm’s sales were allocated to Franklin County Public Schools and Roanoke College prior to the Coronavirus outbreak. With the two aforementioned sales outlets abruptly ceasing normal operations, Four Oaks Farms was left wondering which way to turn. A farm co-operator, Jerry Conner, said they “really thought that was the end” (Fabris, 2020).



The Connors pose with their Summer Crisp lettuce—their farm's bestseller. Photo courtesy of The Roanoke Times.

As the farm is a hydroponics-based operation, much of the lettuces, greens, and other products are perishable and have a very short storage life. Initially, there was a lot of discarded product at Four Oaks. However, things quickly changed.

More and more consumers became interested in buying locally grown produce—partially due to stores facing struggles to keep shelves stocked as the virus and its repercussions intensified. Four Oaks had already been using an online platform for direct orders before the pandemic, but things really took off recently. Further, LEAP—which runs Grandin and West End farmers’ markets in Roanoke—also created an online ordering service. This additional ordering service gave another outlet for sales. Conner said that he thinks “most local farmers are going to tell you that they’re thankful in a way because of the new connections that have been made between the community and the local agriculture” (Fabris, 2020).

Connor went on to say that it was not just sales-related issues that Four Oaks had to endure. Keeping processes on a minimal touch basis and needing to individually bag everything caused an increase in operating costs. Four Oaks recognized that it is not only agriculture, and not only his farm’s sector within the industry, that faced challenges, pointing out those faced by beef and dairy farmers specifically.

In all, the adjustments and fresh outlets utilized by Four Oaks kept them afloat and sparked new relationships with their community. Though some low points were faced in dark times, the



The owner and operator of Four Oaks Farms, Jerry Connor, takes a walk through the operation’s greenhouse. Photo courtesy of The Roanoke Times



Four Oaks Farms' hydroponic greenhouses in Franklin County, VA. Photo courtesy of The Roanoke Times.

Connors remained strong and pushed through. Now that operations are flowing more smoothly once again, the farm's recent business model adjustments and new relationships with markets, the community, and their direct sale customers can be embraced and maintained.

For more information on Four Oaks Farms, [visit their website](#). The farm's Facebook page is accessible [at this link](#).

To learn more about hydroponics-based agriculture, see [this Virginia Cooperative Extension publication](#). This vignette was adapted from an original Roanoke Times article from July 18, 2020.

References

Fabris, C. (2020, July 18). *Farmers cultivate new business models as the pandemic forces them to adapt*. Retrieved from: https://roanoke.com/business/farmers-cultivate-new-business-models-as-the-pandemic-forces-them-to-adapt/article_e935de1b-4ec9-5ac5-95d2-c0294631429e.html