FRESHFARM is a non-profit that promotes sustainable agriculture and improves food access and equity in the Mid-Atlantic region and manages 33 farmers markets in the Washington, DC metropolitan region, which makes it the third-largest farmers market organization in the United States.

The Market Tracker is a Google Sheets database that FRESHFARM uses to collect sales data at the farmers markets that it manages. FRESHFARM has helped other farmers markets use the Market Tracker, and FRESHFARM’s aspirational goal is to offer Market Tracker as an open-source database to farmers market organizations across the United States. This innovation brief will assist other farmer’s market managers assess whether the Market Tracker could be valuable for their own market. The Market Tracker has unique features and is not being widely used to-date.

Farmer’s market managers have significant constraints on their time and resources. These capacity limitations have been exacerbated by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic as markets scramble to implement social distancing guidelines to remain open. Market managers may perceive data collection as a lower-priority activity in this context. However, we show how the Market Tracker has assisted FRESHFARM with adapting to COVID-19. Specifically, it helped FRESHFARM with reporting requirements and with estimating the impacts of COVID-19 on their markets and vendors. Once market managers were able to successfully implement social distancing measures, continuing to collect data using the Market Tracker helps FRESHFARM and quantify and further adapt to the impacts of the pandemic on their markets.
For FRESHFARM, the Market Tracker improves their accounting procedures, streamlines the data collection process for market and administrative staff, and enables the sharing of information among the farmers markets in their network. Prior to the market tracker, it was challenging for FRESHFARM to develop data collection protocols among numerous farmers markets due to market manager turnover and a lack of standardization. The Market Tracker allows FRESHFARM to collect data in a consistent manner, which in turn facilitates an analysis of available agricultural product mixes across their markets, provides real-time benefit and incentive program data to inform their access program outreach and evaluation, and creates clear accounting records to maintain vendor accounts and reports to funders.

**Market Tracker serves several purposes:**

- It forms the basis of a transparent accounting system between FRESHFARM and its vendors. This is helpful because a) fees that FRESHFARM charges to its vendors are based on a percentage of sales and b) vendors accept food assistance benefits and incentives for which they need reimbursement.

- FRESHFARM has multiple funders that support the wide array of food assistance benefits and incentives that they offer at their markets. The database allows FRESHFARM to effectively and accurately create customized reports to funders and local officials about the economic impacts of the markets, as well as provide FRESHFARM administrative staff with clear information to create financial reports and reimbursement schedules.

- The database can assist vendors with their own internal record-keeping, by providing clear accounting records for vendors lacking administrative capacity. Some vendors initially found certain aspects of Market Tracker to be confusing when it was introduced to them. However, by the middle of the first year, approximately 90% of FRESHFARM vendors that used Market Tracker did so consistently throughout the entire market season, and did so largely independent of FRESHFARM’s assistance.

Vendors are incentivized to enter data accurately so that they can use it for other administrative purposes (e.g., accounting, business planning, and evaluating market performance), and FRESHFARM has received anecdotal feedback from vendors that they would prefer similar insight into their sales data at non-FRESHFARM markets. Finally, the database can facilitate evaluation efforts by researchers and market managers on the effectiveness of interventions intended to increase market activity, how different combinations of product types sold at the market may influence sales, or how extraneous events, like hot weather days or rain, impact market performance.

Vendors and FRESHFARM staff both enter data into the system. The Market Tracker database administrator inputs the list of vendors at FRESHFARM markets, a classification of the primary type of product that the vendor sells (e.g., produce or meat), a unique PIN that is required when vendors enter their sales data, and the combination of markets at which the vendors sells products.
Markets located at the same site but on different days are treated as separate markets to better understand market performance. Additionally, the administrator can differentiate between vendors that sell for a select number of market days throughout the year and those that do for the entire market season. Each vendor submits sales data; which is dis-aggregated by cash, credit, and online sales; for each market and market day throughout the entire season, allowing for greater insight into market activity and more data to inform proposals, programmatic decisions, and advocacy for food benefit access programs. FRESHFARM market managers enter the sales data on behalf of the few vendors that do not directly access the system due to technological constraints.

Additionally, market managers submit, for each vendor and market-day, a record of the benefits and incentives that vendors accept as payment. Market managers obtain this information by periodically walking around the market with a tablet while the market is open. They collect benefit tokens from each vendor, count them out in the presence of the vendor, and then enter the amount into the tablet after the vendor has confirmed that the amount is correct. This method of reconciling token redemptions throughout the market day has several administrative advantages. It reduces the number of tokens in circulation at the market since a token could be used multiple times during the market day, and also reduces the administrative burden and possible resulting errors that can arise when market managers tediously count tokens after the market has closed. Additionally, FRESHFARM staff records if a given vendor was absent from the market, present with no incentives redeemed, or present with incentives redeemed. This is a helpful designation for administrative staff who oversee data for multiple markets and review this data on a monthly basis.

Data entered both by the vendors and by FRESHFARM staff is combined to provide a comprehensive accounting for each vendor’s day at the market.

The Market Tracker informs market organizers and producers how the COVID-19 pandemic impacts FRESHFARM’s operations. The Market Tracker allows FRESHFARM to project how market closures and revenue changes will impact their administrative revenue for the year.

The Market Tracker provides FRESHFARM with market data that they, in turn, can communicate to policymakers about how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting direct marketing farmers in the Mid-Atlantic region. Further, with a collapsing economy, FRESHFARM has insight into how the pandemic is impacting food assistance redemption benefits among the most vulnerable residents in the Washington, D.C. area.
FRESHFARM maintains a Market Tracker guide and can provide more specifics about how to put the Market Tracker into practice. FRESHFARM seeks to share the Market Tracker with other interested markets and organizations. FRESHFARM is able to configure the tool to suit the needs of single market operations as well as for multi-market networks.

While FRESHFARM uses the Master Tracker to track sales across their network of farmers markets, they have collaborated with their software developer to develop a single-market version of the Market Tracker. For instance, they shared the Market Tracker with the Crossroads Farmers Market in Maryland, which is a market with relatively high internal capacity. This experience has been positive, and we include testimonial by the Crossroads Farmers Market below, which we have lightly copy-edited.

"Crossroads Community Food Network is building a healthier, more inclusive food system at the Takoma/Langley Crossroads, a primarily immigrant, low-income community just outside Washington, D.C. At the heart of this integrated network of food growers, makers, and consumers is the Crossroads Farmers Market, where an innovative nutrition incentive program makes it easier to bring home more healthy food, and at the same time helps support local farmers and vendors—the majority of whom are also immigrants.

As the Program Manager at the Crossroads Farmers Market, I have been using the Market Tracker for the past nine months. In that time, it has proven to be not only an incredibly useful tool for tracking farmers’ weekly sales, but has also been the primary data collection tool I use to provide information for grant proposals and reports.

In addition, the farmers and market vendors have access to their individual sales reports, allowing them to refer back to their sales at varying parts of the year. For both vendors and market managers, the Market Tracker is an extremely helpful tool to collect and report sales and specific data trends.

For example, a significant number of market attendees use Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Farmers Market Nutrition Program benefits. Utilizing the Master Tracker, I am able to determine which zip codes many of our SNAP and WIC shoppers come from in order to apply for county, state, and federal grants. Ultimately, these funds have helped to support our matching SNAP program at market, special events, and healthy eating food demonstrations. Because this is my second season using the Market Tracker, I’m also able to refer back to the previous year’s sales, and compare any significant differences. As a whole, using the Market Tracker allows me to better digest and
understand financial and geographical data specific to my market, and to easily report this information back to funders and donors."

**Sara Servin,**
**Crossroads Farmers Market**

The Market Tracker can help farmers markets managers collect market data in a standardized way. The Market Tracker has the potential to be adopted by other farmers market networks, as it does not depend on proprietary software, and FRESHFARM has helped other farmers markets use the Market Tracker. However, the Market Tracker is one of several alternatives available to market managers, and it is important to understand its strengths and weaknesses relative to the suite of options that are available. Farmers markets managers have different needs and capacities. So, some resources may be valuable for some markets, while others may be for alternate markets.

To help managers assess whether it makes sense to adopt Market Tracker at their own market, we present other preexisting data collection options and a select number of other relevant technical assistance resources available to market managers. This will allow managers to compare the functionality of the Market Tracker with alternatives.

**Farmers Market Metrics** ([https://farmersmarketmetrics.guide/](https://farmersmarketmetrics.guide/)):

According to the Farmers Market Coalition, approximately 300 farmers markets in the United States are using Farmers Market Metrics. The Farmers Market Coalition has developed Farmers Market Metrics as a software platform for market managers. Farmers Market Metrics has templates that allow managers to collect a wide variety of information, such as vendor sales, customer data and vendor attributes. Metrics further compiles data into public-facing infographics that can be provided to local officials or embedded within.
social media posts. Metrics provides market managers with several options for entering data, which provides flexibility. In Metrics, users can specify which collaborators are able to access their data.

While there is partial overlap in the functionality of Metrics and Market Tracker, their differences imply they can serve as complements. FRESHFARM, for instance, uses Farmers Market Metrics alongside the Market Tracker.

Farm 2 Facts (https://farm2facts.org/): This resource, developed by the University of Wisconsin (Madison), is similar to Farmers Market Metrics. Data entered into Farm 2 Facts is jointly owned by the University of Wisconsin and the farmers market organization managemymarket.

This software offers farmer market managers an online vendor management system. It helps market managers process vendor applications, organize vendor-specific documents, specify payment plans and other market regulations, and provide a question-and-answer portal for vendors. FRESHFARM is able to pull vendor information from managemymarket into the Market Tracker, so that this information does not need to be collected in multiple places.

Farmers Market Legal Toolkit (https://farmersmarketlegaltoolkit.org/): This resource assists farmers market managers with establishing best practices in record-keeping, identifying business organizational structures, accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, and managing market risks.

The Farmers Market Coalition maintains a more comprehensive list of resources at: http://farmersmarketcoalition.org/education/resourcelibrary/, powerpoint presentations from farmers market managers across the United States from the 2019 National Direct Agricultural Marketing Summit are available at the following website address: https://localfoodeconomics.com/agsummit2019/#download.
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Thanks for reading!

For more information and resources on Local and Regional Food Systems Response to COVID: Building Better Beyond, visit: https://lfscovid.localfoodeconomics.com/ where you can sign up for our project listserv, read other innovation briefs, and check out resources put forth by other sectors of the local and regional food system.

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