

Wildfire Relief Fund for Oregon Farmers

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Local, community-based organizations are often the first to respond to natural disasters like wildfires, as they have a deep understanding of the needs of their communities and the people who live there. When nature disasters such as wildfires impact the local and regional food system of an area, community organizations recognize and respond to the immediate need for relief funds for farm and ranch operations and can organize grassroots funding efforts to fill short-term gaps.

These efforts involve fundraising from local businesses, individuals, and community groups and providing support to impacted farming operations. The trust and established relationships that community-based organizations have within their local and regional food systems allows them to quickly fundraise and accurately distribute money and resources to farmers in need.

Community Organized Farmer Relief

In the aftermath of the rampant wildfires in the Pacific Northwest in September 2020, many of Oregon's small-scale farmers and ranchers faced devastating losses due to fire and windstorms.



A CSA Farm in Eagle Creek, Oregon

Rapid evacuations forced farmers to abandon livestock, and crops, while on-farm infrastructure was consumed by fires, resulting in decimated income streams and capital loss. In response, the [Pacific Northwest Community Supported Agriculture Coalition](#) (Pacific NW CSA Coalition) established a GoFundMe campaign to help small farms recover from wildfire damage. In operation since the early 1990s, Pacific NW CSA Coalition provides education about Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), supports market access for small farmers throughout Oregon and southern Washington, and connects consumers with farms that best suit their needs.

Pacific NW CSA Coalition is a non-profit organization that supports more than 75 CSA member farms who sell to more than 35,000 households.

Holly Hutchason, Pacific NW CSA Coalition's Executive Director, explained that the wildfires hit during peak harvest season in Oregon. Therefore, in addition to evacuating themselves and their livestock, some farmers lost whole seasons of revenue because of the fires.

"It was obvious that people wanted to help the farmers impacted and what was needed was very specific, and that was money. We started a GoFundMe campaign because farmers needed money for trucks and to rebuild greenhouses. We published on social media, word spread fast, and the money started coming in." - Holly Hutchason

While most of the donations came from throughout the Pacific Northwest, the fundraising campaign saw donations from sustainable agriculture supporters across the country. Local businesses in Oregon ran their own mini fundraisers while the GoFundMe was active with one distillery donating 10% of their sales from a gin into the Farmer Relief Fund.

With close to \$35,000 raised, Pacific NW CSA Coalition partnered with [Friends of Family Farmers](#) and other Oregon food systems representatives to develop a process through which farmers could apply for the funds.

They determined that a mini-grant program was the best approach to distributing the money and settled on grants up to \$1,500 each for repairing and rebuilding what farmers had lost, as well as compensating them for lost crops and sales due to evacuation mandates. The group of volunteers in charge of administering the money established the eligibility criteria that applicants needed to meet and created a short Google Form application asking basic questions like demographic information, what their losses were, the value of the loss, and if any of the losses would be covered by insurance.

The following is the eligibility criteria to apply for direct financial relief:

- Farmers that are actively working the land and are involved in the day-to-day operations of the farm.
- The farm must be located in Oregon.
- Farmers that primarily sell direct-to-market comestibles or seeds.
- Farm operations that make less than \$250,000 in gross sales annually.

Farmers provided the following answers when asked how the funds will be used:

"We are very behind on our bills due to lost farmer's market and wholesale revenue. We weren't able to harvest during evacuation and lost our dry farmed tomato field and other summer crops due to thick smoke and lack of sunlight."

"We would definitely buy more seeds, more infrastructure such as trellis, poles and material to build structures that would protect our crops/flowers from being killed or knocked down by the winds and smoke."

“As a result of the winds and wildfires we lost a tractor that is in need of repair and the opportunity to harvest crop that got destroyed, the land that we farm on was inaccessible for a lengthy period of time and we were unable to get seeds in the green house for winter crops. With the funds we will repair or replace the tractor, build a hoop house and see if we can locate winter starts so we are back on track for our winter CSA.”

“I cannot bring back the damaged crops but will use the money to purchase seed. The damaged buildings will receive repairs of tin patching on the roof and a few boards on the sides.”

While they encouraged all farmers to apply, the group prioritized funding requests from farmers of color, immigrant farmers, and undocumented farmers due to the systems of historic inequities that have made it challenging for those communities to access traditional forms of federal aid.

A Quick Distribution of Funds

Fifty-six valid applications were received, and the volunteer administration group ranked them using a point system and rubric based on how impactful the funds would be and how the farmers planned to spend the money. Ultimately \$34,200 was distributed to 29 different farms where funds were used to replace irrigation water to wash away ash, purchase seeds, rebuild infrastructure like fences, greenhouses, and other uses. Checks were distributed directly to farmers in December 2020, only 3 months after the GoFundMe had been created.

In response to learning they had been awarded funding, farmers sent words of thanks to Holly and her team.

“It is with much excitement that I accept this gift of relief to help grow my business. With so much going on, I had forgotten that I even applied until I received your email. Despite the many challenges (that I know many small farmers faced as well) this year, I am grateful for this encouragement and support. I am thrilled to participate and contribute in any way possible to help maintain Oregon's historic and strong connection to land, farmers and clean, healthy food.”

“Thank you so much! This is really good news; we are so grateful you all chose to support us. This will go a long way in getting us back on track. This was such an amazing surprise to get in my inbox and the news couldn't have come at a better time.”

“I have so much appreciation for all of the work that you all have done to support farmers impacted by the fires.”

“Thank you so much!! I cannot begin to express my gratitude. I don't know who all of the donors are, but I hope that they truly know the difference they are making.”

This farmer-focused funding supported farmers who needed money fast and otherwise may not have been able to receive money from federal sources.

“We need to look within local and regional food systems for relief. Our [small] farmers are who fall through the federal farmer support cracks. The relief we were able to secure in a pinch is not sustainable, but it speaks to the unique needs of the farmers. More institutionalized funding means the unique needs of farmers may not be met.”

- Holly Hutchason

Holly further emphasized that for community-led grassroots funding efforts to work, there must be deep ties to the farming community with high levels of transparency and accountability.

“Having people who know the farmer and the farming part, as part of the grant-giving process is key. [They understand] what kind of money is needed, how much each grant should be, and how the money might be spent. Institutional funders may not have the best insight into what funding would be most meaningful.”

The Need for a Sustained Source of Farmer-Focused Disaster Relief

While the ability to distribute money quickly and flexibly to farmers who need it most is a strength of grassroots funding efforts, Holly explained that this is where the conflict also lies. The Oregon small farm wildfire relief fund organized by Pacific NW CSA Coalition was entirely volunteer managed and, as Holly stated, “completely consumed two full months of my life...and is not a long-term solution.”

This illuminates the need for a better, more sustainable method of distributing fast and flexible farmer relief funds. Future efforts would benefit from operational support for the type of grassroots level fundraising and money distribution undertaken by the Pacific NW CSA Coalition. Seeing that diverse, small-scale food producers may not have access to traditional forms of risk-management and insurance, it is essential that sustained on-farm disaster relief be available because, as Holly stated, “wildfires are going to happen again.”

Because of this, Holly explained that Oregon community food system leaders are lobbying the state legislature to organize a steady fund earmarked for farmer disaster relief. However, transferring management of a relief fund to government operations risks impeding the agility and flexibility the grassroots campaign was able to deliver. Additionally, ensuring that the money is distributed equitably and to farmers underserved by traditional funding streams is essential to any relief funding system that may be implemented.

Role of Grassroots Funding

Grassroots funding efforts, like the one spearheaded by the Pacific Northwest Community Supported Agriculture Coalition, are crucial for helping farmers and ranchers recover from natural disasters. They provide the immediate financial support needed to help businesses get back on their feet. Farmers were able to cover the costs of rebuilding infrastructure, replenish crops, and replace lost equipment, all essential components of long-term farm viability.

Pacific Northwest Community Supported Agriculture Coalition’s approach to rapid support for farmers impacted by wildfires is one example of how communities self-organize to provide direct financial support to farm operators and food businesses impacted by natural disasters. This case study shows weather-related disruptions are associated with destruction of on-farm and supply chain infrastructure and loss of income. By working together and pooling their resources, community-based organizations can have a significant impact in helping diversified farm and ranch operations recover from the devastating effects of wildfires.

Community and faith-based food systems initiatives are uniquely positioned to both identify, understand, and respond to the needs of historically underserved and vulnerable communities. Drawing on longstanding traditions of mutual-aid and cooperation, these groups can mobilize quickly to connect their communities with emergency feeding programs as well as deploy cooperative economic models to support underserved food producers in times of disruption and beyond.

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Thanks for reading!

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For more information and resources on Local and Regional Food Systems Response to COVID: Recovery and Resilience, visit www.lfscovis.localfoodeconomics.com.

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