

The FRESHFARM Pop-Up Food Hub: A Case Study

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The FRESHFARM Pop-Up Food Hub (PUFH) is an Innovative Model Connecting Farmers to Families in the Washington, DC region



About FRESHFARM

Since 1997, FRESHFARM has worked to build a more equitable, sustainable, and resilient food system in the Mid-Atlantic region by producing innovative solutions in partnership with local organizations and communities.

FRESHFARM operates 24 farmers markets and farm stands, which serve almost 1 million shoppers every year. These markets invigorate communities by creating inclusive spaces that connect shoppers from all walks of life with local, wholesome foods and the farmers that grow them. Shoppers come to our markets from across Washington, DC, Virginia and Maryland, transforming the way people eat and value the power of local food.



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Food Hubs 101

A food hub is a “centrally located facility with a business management structure facilitating the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, and/or marketing of locally/regionally produced food products,” per the USDA.

The number of food hubs across the US have been steadily increasing. According to the 2017 National Food Hub Survey, regional food hubs grew in number by 288% between 2007 and 2014 and as of 2017, there were 400 food hubs in the U.S.

Food hubs are critical in rebuilding the regional food economy by connecting smaller and medium-sized farmers with wholesale customers who can purchase at scale.

To be successful, a food hub must coordinate with farmers, aggregate, process and store products and distribute them to buyers. And, for many food hubs, values like sustainability, social justice, equity and community impact are other vital measures of success.

The start-up costs of a traditional food hubs are steep and include:

- Access to Land
- Physical Space (i.e. a warehouse)
- Refrigeration
- Trucks, Truck Drivers



Alternative Food Hub: A Pop Up Model

In 2016, FRESHFARM launched the Pop Up Food Hub, an innovative model for local food distribution that bypasses many of the traditional food hub barriers.

Inspired by a mesh network model, this model uses farmers markets as both distributors and aggregators of food. This allows us to run a low-infrastructure, decentralized food distribution program that keeps fresh local food affordable, while creating new revenue for family farms.



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How the Model Works

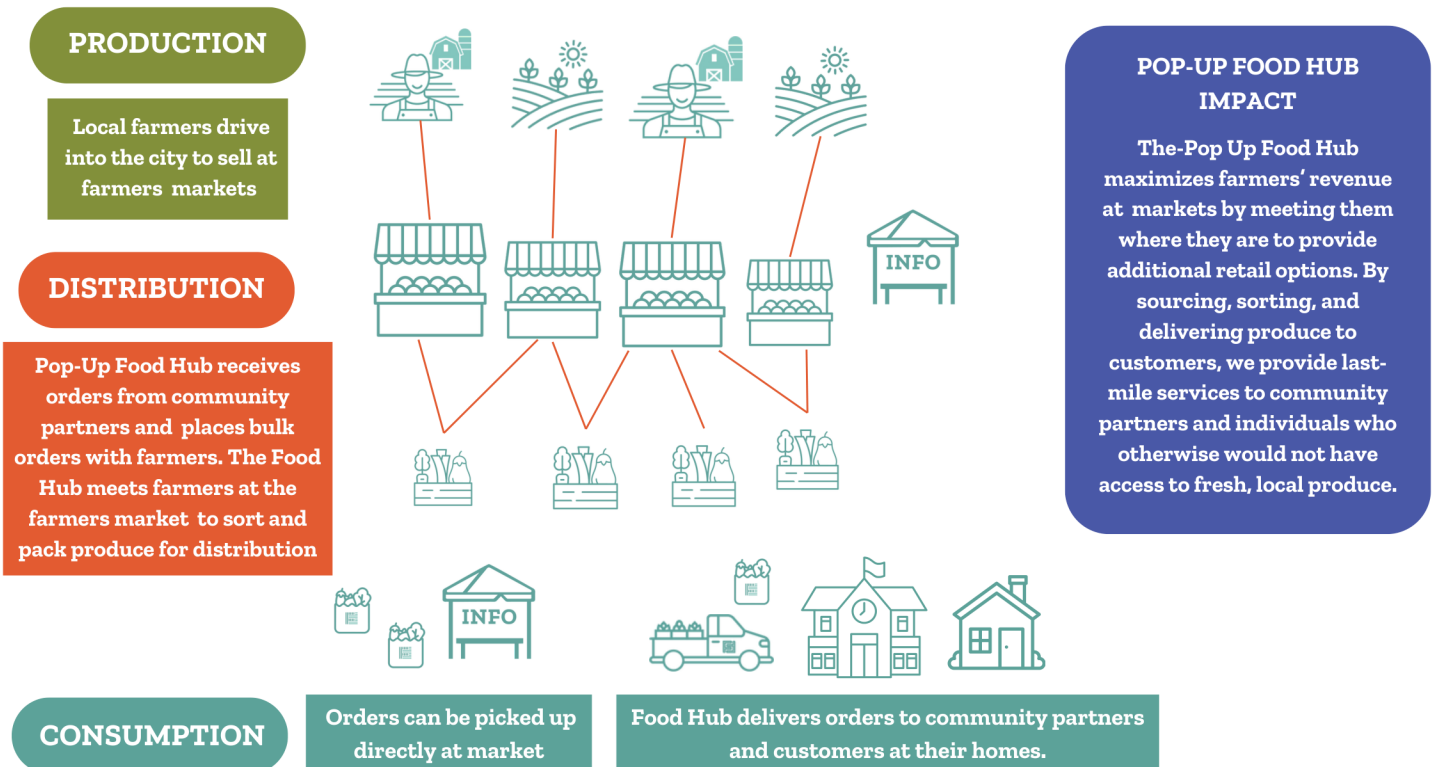
This model uses farmers markets in place of traditional warehousing to facilitate wholesale distribution to community-based partners and others. This program creates economic opportunities for local growers, improves food access for those in need and strengthens our regional food system.

Partners receive a weekly customized list of what our farmers have available and then orders are placed on a free Google-sheet platform, which is formatted to convert the number of individuals being served to the number of pints, bushels, or cases of product. The Google document also automatically tabulates and bundles by farmer, making it easy to know what we need to order from each farmer.

After receiving the weekly orders, we place consolidated orders with our farm partners. These farmers then harvest and transport the product into the city on their regularly scheduled market day. This allows the farmers to make more efficient use of the staffing and transportation costs of market participation while also growing and diversifying their sales.

The farmers arrive at the market with their wholesale delivery on board. The FRESHFARM staff receive these bulk orders, disaggregate and pack them into their corresponding orders on-site, place them in our vans, and deliver them directly from the market. At the end of the day, the market packs up and the farmers go home, just like they would after any other farmers market.

THE FRESHFARM POP-UP FOOD HUB MODEL



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This low-infrastructure model has low overhead costs

- The receiving and repacking are done under tents at markets
- The vans are loaded and then sent off for deliveries.
- With no minimum order, we can serve even the smallest clients, creating equity in the food system.

By taking advantage of the farmer's trip to the city, food travels shorter distances from the farmers market to the consumer, reducing carbon emissions associated with transportation.

How Adaptable is this Model?

This model can easily be scaled up or down. As the demand for local food in a particular area or under a particular environmental condition grows, more farmers can join the network, and existing farmers can expand their operations.

Just like mesh networks, our model is built for replicability because it is adaptable to regional/local environmental conditions. In a decentralized food model, farmers can adapt their practices to local soil, climate, and market conditions, producing a diverse range of foods that are suited to their specific farm.

In 2022, FRESHFARM added a "micro hub," a small shared indoor space in Maryland, for receiving, packing, storing and distributing produce, and occasional overnight storage.



A decentralized, low-infrastructure food distribution model can create a more resilient food system by distributing risk, supporting local economies, enhancing sustainability and fostering community resilience.

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Lessons Learned

- Small and mid-size farms may not know much about wholesale ordering: farms may benefit from technical assistance and guidance on wholesale ordering, like how to pack produce and how it should look.
- Set customer expectations: local produce looks different (ie, apples may be different sizes) and setting clear and transparent expectations with customers up front is key.
- The food system doesn't just operate on weekends: farms need consistent outlets for harvested produce even/especially during the week and, in some parts of the US, during the winter months. A pop-up model can help.
- Customer feedback is key: many farmers don't get much customer feedback. Sharing insights about what is popular (or not) can be helpful in crop planning.



PUFH Growth Over Time	2020	2021 (COVID)	2022 (COVID)	2023 (Projected)
Farmer Partners	22	35	36	40
Wholesale Partners	31	35	57	70
# bags of Local Produce Distributed	22,395	22,086	25,961	26,000
\$ Revenue for PUFH farmers	\$599K	\$412K	\$504K	\$600K

Pop-Up Food Hub: A Case Study Workbook

Considering Launching a Pop-Up Food Hub in your Community?

Use these questions as preliminary prompts to consider developing your own pop-up food hub:

- What are your potential aggregation sites (farmers markets)? Location, day(s) and hours of operation, and start/end dates should be included for each potential aggregation site.
- Do you have a pre-existing base of committed/interested/potential customers that are ready to participate when program operations begin? If not, do you have a list of potential customers to reach out to? Finally, what is the minimum number of customers/partners that you need to initiate the program's operations?
- What is your existing infrastructure? This may include distribution vehicles, storage capacity (cold & dry), aggregating/packaging/distribution materials (tents, tables, carts, crates, scales, bags, etc.), and labor (operational and administrative).

PROCUREMENT

- Identify farmers markets and potential days that may work
- Identify possible producers and conduct outreach to gauge interest
 - Ask questions such as: *what items do you grow/offer and are they of interest to potential customers (and can they afford them); pricing, seasonality, quantity, packaging*
- Consider and refine if the network can handle wholesale distribution

PARTNERS/PROGRAMS

- ID potential customers/partners. Consider: nonprofits, restaurants, corporate/private, food pantries, schools etc.
 - What do potential partners look like in your community? Corner stores? At market aggregated CSA?

OPERATIONS

- Consider limitations regarding delivery radius, how many deliveries can you make in a day and how many team members you need to pack, drive and deliver food
- Consider costs, include the costs of goods, labor, gas/vehicle maintenance



Pop-Up Food Hub: A Case Study Workbook

Based on the answers to the previous questions, consider these final planning considerations:

PROCUREMENT Talk with farm owner or manager to better understand their:

- Current capacity and limitations
 - Consider acreage (cultivated and uncultivated); farm infrastructure (high tunnels/greenhouses, cold storage, dry storage, wash and pack station, tractors, digging and tilling implements, etc.); current and available farm labor; number and size of truck(s).
- Typical schedule and sales outlets
 - # of farmers markets, days of the week and stop/start dates; CSA and other wholesale customers, if any; harvest days during the week.
- Crop plan throughout the year
 - What is the list of items they grow throughout the year? Can you get quantity estimates for each item/variety? What is the date of their first planting? What items are planted in succession (e.g. brassicas & nightshades) and what items are planted once a season (e.g. alliums)? What are they growing/planting in between the first and last frosts of the winter? Are they growing anything in high tunnels or greenhouses, or overwintering in the field? Are there any items they are open to growing or increasing their current output of if customer demand warrants?
- Payment system for producers. Do any of them require specific terms for payment?

PARTNERS Things to consider and discuss with partners include:

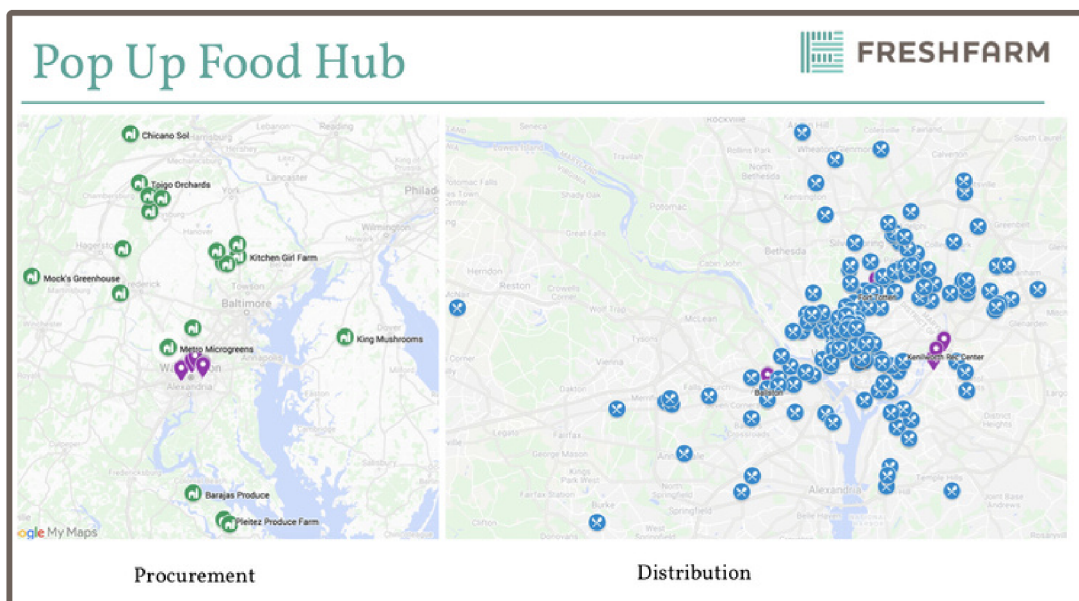
- When are your customers able to receive delivery? What day(s) of the week and time(s) of day?
- What is/are the at-market pickup options for customers (individual and institutional)? What is the level of interest on the customer side for at-market pickups, and what is the capacity of the program to accommodate at-market pickups?
- How and when is the produce that is received being used? Is it for personal consumption or being prepared for a larger group? Is it being immediately consumed or stored for later use? Is it being resold to a different end user?
- How would the customer prefer to receive the product? Can you offer a CSA-style option for ordering, or would you prefer to have wholesale customers order strictly a la carte?
- What is the customer's budget? Budget can either be per person, or total
- How are payments being processed? Who is following up with customers for orders received?
- What is the process for handling quality-related customer complaints? What is the general return/refund/credit policy for individual and institutional customers?

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Based on the answers to the previous questions, consider these final planning considerations:

OPERATIONS Things to consider include:

- What are the program’s days of distribution that are being offered? What are the delivery windows for each distribution day?
- What is the delivery radius for each distribution day? How long is the delivery route for each day, and how many stops are on each delivery route?
- What are the receiving details for each customer delivery? Are you delivering to home addresses, businesses, schools, etc.? Is there a loading dock, adequate parking, ramps to transport food inside? Is there a consistent point of contact for receiving deliveries? Is the delivery a simple drop-off, or do we need to put the food in a specific location?
- Do any customers receiving delivery have follow-up details? Are there any reusable distribution materials that need to be picked up on the next delivery or at a later date?



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