BASTROP COUNTY, TEXAS

RESILIENT COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEM RESEARCH BRIEF

Impacts from COVID and severe climactic events

PREPARED BY

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INTRODUCTION

This research brief is formatted to give an in-depth analysis of findings related to impacts of the Lost Pines Fire of 2011 and additional climactic events over the last decade, as well as COVID-19, on the Bastrop County food system. The study included five focus groups (12 participants total), 17 interviews and a survey with 76 responses across Bastrop County. Participants included community advocates, city and county government, farmers and food businesses, non-profits, schools, and state organizations. Texas Center for Local Food supported the project through outreach for participation in surveys, interviews and focus groups.

Overall, community members shared a strong desire for change. This included comments around increased collaboration and improved communication among organizations and networks. Transparency and opportunity to engage was discussed by 58% of interview participants and was brought up in three of the five focus groups, as well as shared in surveys. All focus group discussions included the need for more communication and participation with groups, as well as the desire for actionable items to be identified for next steps.

SUGGESTED PRIORITIES FROM ACTION PLANNING

The priority that will be acted on through funding from the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center will be creating a food system coalition–specifically identified in priority 1 below–with the primary goal to identify roles, expectations, and a response plan for disasters. The $10,000 will be allocated to the Texas Center for Local Food, which will then provide stipends to farmers, organizations, and businesses for participation in the coalition.

No. 01
Create a county-wide coalition for food system resilience, including prevention, response, and recovery.

No. 02
Educate about the complexities and intersectionality of community in formal and informal settings.

No. 03
Address ability to scale production, processing, and distribution for local and regional farms.

No. 04
Build an awareness campaign about local food systems.

No. 05
Fund and develop farmer networks for sharing needs and tools in a peer-to-peer setting; may connect to TXFed.org with the Texas Center for Local Food; an email or communication tree for farmers.

No. 06
Establish new, or identify existing, insurance programs for small to mid-size farmers that will aid in extreme weather conditions.

No. 07
Write a hazard mitigation and response checklist for farms, food businesses, pantries and food banks, schools, and additional organizations that impact food access; including, but not limited to, access to farms during a severe weather event, water, and power protocols, food access and shelter locations, etc.

COMMUNITY OVERVIEW

This section reviews values and ways that community members participate and connect in community. Individuals were asked to select their top three societal values from a pre-created list. Education, Diversity, and Environment rank as the highest values with 41% agreeing that Education is a value. Social networks were seen as a great strength across Bastrop County, including areas of local foods. However, there were concerns about networks being privileged and exclusive in some areas, with many comments on having silos or work and little collaboration between the cities in Bastrop County.

When asked specifically about how important it was to support local farm and food businesses, 85 percent agreed that it was either extremely important or very important.

The intent of this research is to understand the interest and ability to have a resilient food system. Primarily, understanding the community's interest in local and regional foods, and the willingness to participate and purchase from farm and food businesses that operate within a local or regional geography. When asked to think about and describe the community food system, several individuals shared that they are unsure if one exists in Bastrop County. Individuals seemed to focus on three areas: food security, farmers markets, and production opportunities. Food pantries and food banks were seen as leaders in providing access to essential food needs, and numerous partnerships have been formed to support the distribution of food to families through non-profits, faith-based affiliations, and businesses.

To further understand purchasing habits, survey participants were asked about the level of importance for attributes for purchasing food. Grown local, relationship with producers or seller, and organic rank as the lowest attributes for food purchasing decisions. There is a critical need for increased awareness about the importance of sourcing local to maintain the local farms and food businesses within the community.
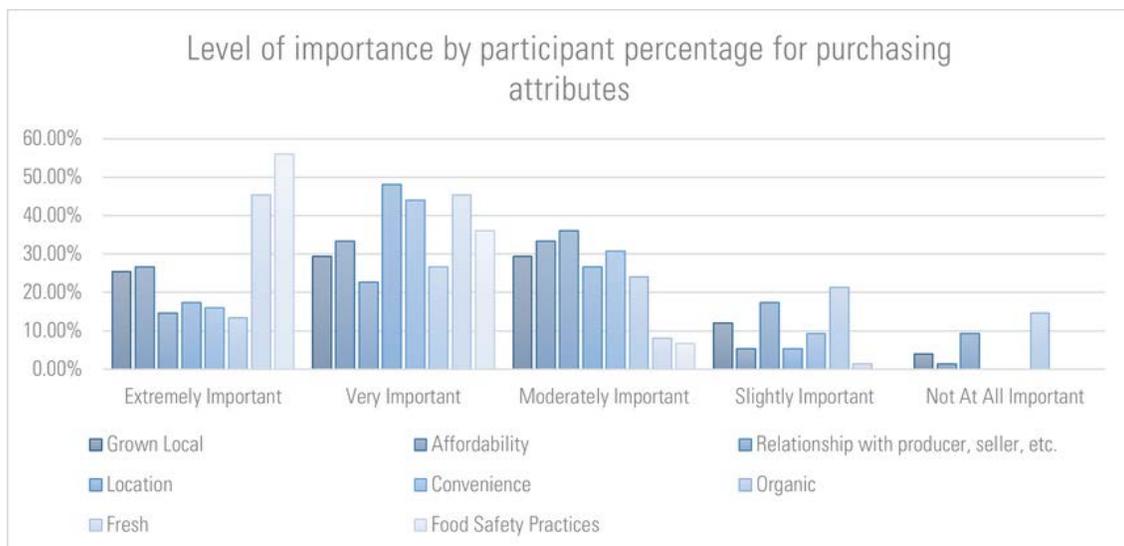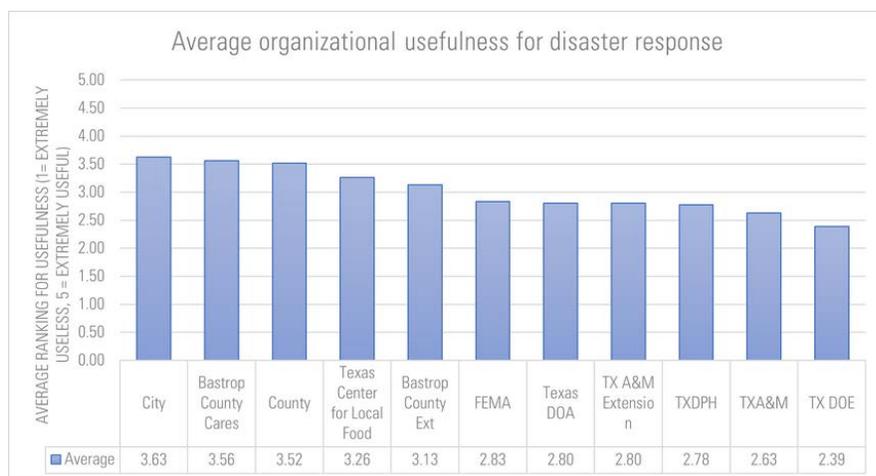

Figure 1: Importance of food attributes by percentage (N=75, except N=73 for location, and N=74 for food safety).

NATURAL DISASTERS IMPACT

Natural disasters impact all of community life, ranging from mild challenges for transportation and ease of access to devastating loss of infrastructure and life. Bastrop County has been involved in ten designated disaster areas since 2011. Interview, focus group and survey participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of natural disasters. Of the 76 survey participants, 71 (93%) shared that they experienced a natural disaster, which included Lost Pines Fire of 2011 and Winter Storm Uri of 2021, or other climactic events such as hail, flood, wind, tornado, and drought. Of those who experienced a natural disaster, 59 (83%) experienced more than one event.

Increase in mental stress and damage to home or property were the most common impacts across all disasters.

The Lost Pines Fire created the most stress and many individuals shared that while they did not experience the fire firsthand, there was an immense amount of community outreach and support, and concern for neighbors through this event. Winter Storm Uri created the most issues of all storms for loss of essential provisions. Drought was seen as the highest cause of damage to business and farmland, and hail created the most damage to home, land, and other property. Communication concerns were shared as a gap from the city and county on expectations and preparedness for the storm. Participants mentioned that the storm highlighted the communication constraints that exist including access to internet service and messaging needed as text or phone call to help address lack of internet access.

Average organizational usefulness for disaster response

	City	Bastrop County Cares	County	Texas Center for Local Food	Bastrop County Ext	FEMA	Texas DOA	TX A&M Extension	TXDPH	TXA&M	TX DOE
Average	3.63	3.56	3.52	3.26	3.13	2.83	2.80	2.80	2.78	2.63	2.39

AVERAGE RANKING FOR USEFULNESS (1= EXTREMELY USELESS, 5 = EXTREMELY USEFUL)

Figure 2: Average usefulness of organizations for responding to Natural Disasters. N = variable; see Snapshot, Table 8 for total number of participants.

Many times, individuals may not know which organizations provide support in response to disaster, which is an additional need for organizations to determine how, and if, they want to be seen as a useful resource when disasters occur.

City Government, Bastrop County Cares, and Bastrop County government were seen to be the most useful organizations, while Texas Department of Public Health, Texas A&M, and Texas Department of Education were seen to be the least useful. Additional categories were identified by providing "other" responses in surveys, which included churches, school districts, neighbors, local businesses, Texas Recovery, and USDA. When discussed within interviews and focus groups, it was also shared that funders and grantors, neighbors, and volunteers, as well as partners outside of the state were influential in responding to natural disasters. Additionally, it should also be noted that organizational usefulness may be more about branding and outreach, rather than actual usefulness once individuals connect.

COVID-19 IMPACT

Research participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of natural disasters. Of the 76 survey participants, 70 (92%), shared that they experienced COVID-19. Of those who experienced COVID-19, 66 (94%), also experienced at least one natural disaster that happened within the same time frame. COVID-19 and having multiple disasters influence mental and physical health, including general fatigue from exposure and worry, and stress related to financial and employment constraints that have occurred due to supply-chain and corporate closures.

The most significant impact for individuals was being unable to see others and the mental stress that COVID-19 caused.

Individuals shared their fear of the future due to lack of "not knowing" and general stress over how individual community members are responding. It was also critical that services, such as the farmers market, were deemed to be essential businesses so they could continue to operate. These services stayed open and were frequented due to new technologies that allowed for customers to pre-order and pick up, as well as new door-to-door delivery options that occurred. When it comes to considering how to maintain new programs, like food box delivery or curbside delivery.
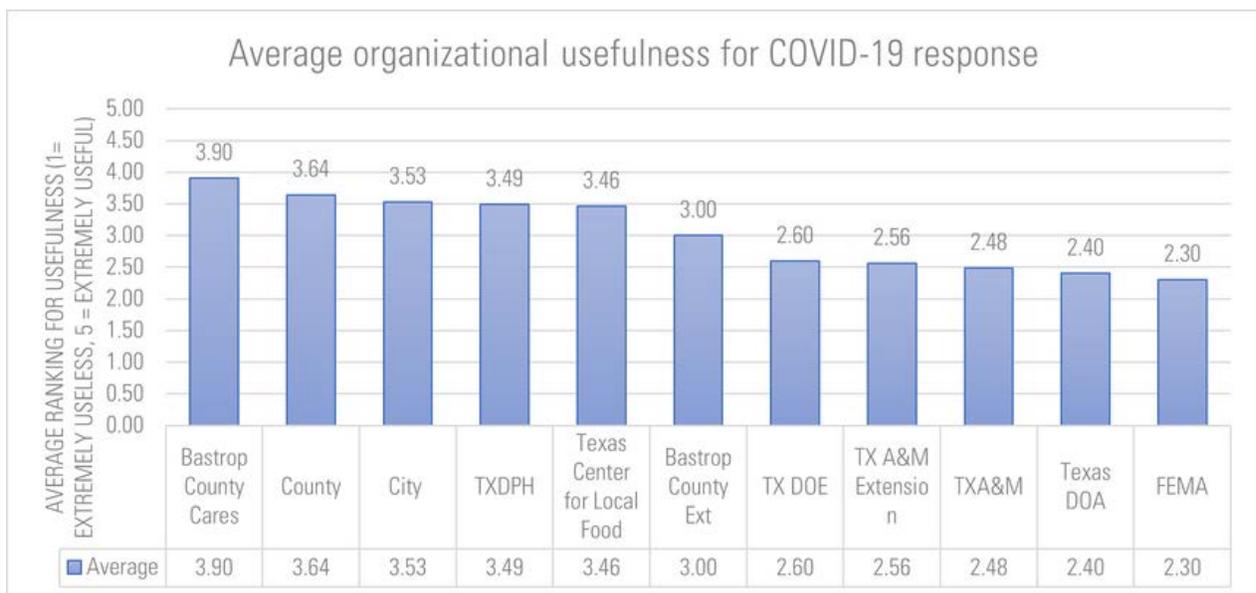

Figure 3: Average usefulness of organizations for responding to COVID-19. N = variable; see Snapshot, Table 12 for total number of participants.

Bastrop County Cares, Bastrop County government, and City government were seen to be the most useful organizations, while Texas A&M, Texas Department of Agriculture and FEMA were seen to be the least useful. It should also be noted that while City government was ranked to have a usefulness of 3.53, they also had one of the top three percentage (10.91%) of being "somewhat useless," and each organization had at least 9% of the survey participants stating they were "extremely useless" when it came to COVID-19 response. It should also be noted that organizational usefulness may be more about branding and outreach, rather than actual usefulness once individuals connect.

Individuals shared their support of each other during COVID-19 and not always relying on organizations for responding to COVID-19.

PRIORITY AREAS

01. Create a county-wide coalition for food system resilience, including prevention, response, and recovery.

- 1.1 - Identify roles for each partner within the network, including expectations, accountability measures, and capacity.
- 1.2 - Expand network and encourage additional participation; this may include funding allocations for marginalized individuals, groups, and organizations.
- 1.3 - Develop materials for multilingual communication, including print, web, text, and call platforms.
- 1.4 - Have response teams within locale (neighborhood captains(, region (City and County contacts), and external regional partners.
- 1.5 - Develop a general directory of resources and available organizations for support that fall within sectors of the food system, as well as intersectional areas such as housing and shelter, emergency resources, financial support, etc., including where to turn to for certain agricultural products.
- 1.6 - Encourage more participation from churches, non-profits, chambers, and city administrators through engagement in meetings and dialogue with Bastrop County Cares; coordinate a network of networks for all groups working towards resilience.

02. Educate about the complexities and intersectionality of community in formal and informal settings.

- 2.1 - Inform the public on labeling and consider policy enforcement.
- 2.2 - Determine how to best share about production practices.

03. Address ability to scale production, processing, and distribution for local and regional farms.

- 3.1 - Investigate community-supported business models and cooperatives that encourage community buy-in and ownership.
- 3.2 - Create a checklist of best practices.
- 3.3 - Develop a directory of trusted leaders and mentors within farming, including educational workshops and field days to learn from others.

04. Build an awareness campaign about local food systems.

- 4.1 - Share about impacts from farms, food businesses, grocers, and consumers related to disaster and COVID.
- 4.2 - Develop an awareness campaign about that natural disasters have had on food and farm businesses, the importance of supporting local businesses and organizations: sharing stories and narratives; economic impact indicators, etc.

05. Fund and develop farmer networks for sharing needs and tools in a peer-to-peer setting.

- 5.1 - Develop a funding mechanism to ensure that financial capital is available at the time of disaster.
- 5.2 - Create professional development opportunities and classes for local food system partners.
- 5.3 - Encourage inspirational peer-to-peer leadership and building experiences among community for food systems advocacy.

This priority area may connect to TXFED.org with the Texas Center for Local Food and an email or communication tree for farmers.
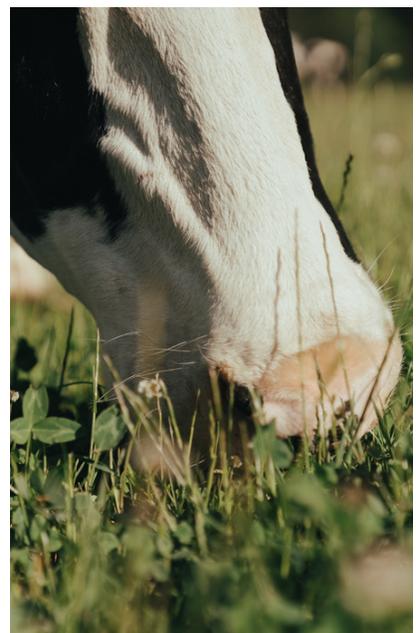
PRIORITY AREAS

06. Establish new, or identify, existing insurance programs for small to mid-size farmers that will aid in extreme weather conditions.

- 6.1 - Teach about the food system: local, regional, national, and global production; processing; and distribution.
- 6.2 - Detail the impacts of our supply chain on communities, farms, and food businesses.

07. Write a hazard mitigation and response checklist for farms, food businesses, pantries, food banks, schools, and additional food access organizations.

This priority may also include, but is not limited to, access to farms during a sever weather event, water, and power protocols (having water storage, generator access and usability, tool sharing, etc.), food access, and shelter locations, etc.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you to all the farmers, businesses, organizations, staff, and individuals that met and shared their stories with us throughout the last two years. Thank you for your work and dedication to resilient food systems. We are humbled and grateful for your time.

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To read the full Bastrop County, Texas Food System Resilience Snapshot, visit

bit.ly/agmrc_ResilientFoodSystems