**The New Food Network**

A brand new farmstand sits on a dirt road on the outskirts of Huson, Montana, population 210. Out of the way does not begin to describe this location. Tracy Potter-Fins, owner of County Rail Farms, sets out the offerings for the farmstand’s second day of life. The first day had resulted in one sale, thanks to her post on Nextdoor, a neighborhood based social network.

“She got onions, she got kale starts, she got carrots, she was psyched," Potter-Fins recounts, based on the customer's follow-up post on Nextdoor.

Prices are listed at the farmstand, but a sign says to pay as much as you can. In small town Montana, that often isn’t much. The original idea, first proposed by a farmhand last summer, was to offer unsold produce to the local community at a steep discount.

“We want to get as much food into the hands of low-income people as we can without hurting our business,” Potter-Fins says.

Thanks to the pandemic, Potter-Fins’ marketing plan remains fluid, and her farmstand could play a crucial roles beyond its original job as surplus liquidation site. From a social distancing perspective the first sale could not have gone better. The customer came, shopped and left without any face-to-face or hand-to-hand interactions. In addition to being an unstaffed point of sale, the farmstand will also be a drop-off point for online orders. And perhaps more, depending on how the season unfolds.

Consumers of fresh veggies, meanwhile, are also considering alternatives. For numerous virus-related reasons, many are looking to take a more active role in their food supply chains. Some are stockpiling canned goods, while others don’t want to go anywhere near a supermarket. Many are preparing to grow their own, or doubling down on their local food networks.

Whatever your strategy, you now finally have the time to dig that garden or build that chicken coop. But the only hitch to pivoting to full blown Little House on the Prairie is that if you want an actual chicken for that coop, or seeds for that garden, you'll have to wait.

Chicken hatcheries are about a month behind the backlog of orders, and seed companies are behind as well, thanks to unprecedented order volume and slower working conditions delaying fulfillment. Johnny’s Seeds, the lion in the family farm seed space, has suspended sales to non-commercial growers.

Many vegetable farms, meanwhile, are preparing for farmers markets that may or may not be open, restaurant accounts that may or may not exist, and a pent-up demand for plant starts that will test any farmers market’s social distancing and anti-hoarding protocols.

“Most of us don’t know what for sure to do right now,” Potter-Fins says. “We don’t know if we will be able to sell our food, or if people will be able to pay for it. We’re looking at all the different ways that might work to get food into the community.”

At Frank’s Little Farm in Missoula, my home town and a regional hub, the Roadside Stand is as old as the farm itself. While Potter-Fins’ farmstand is in the middle of nowhere, Frank’s stand is around the corner from the best vegetable store in town.

After building a farmstand on another farm, Frank’s co-owner Sean McCoy built his own on newly purchased land in 2014. McCoy loves that farmstand. “The idea is to have something available seven days a week, dawn to dusk, with no staffing cost. We stock it and people come serve themselves.”

Frank’s Little Farm is named in honor of slain Montana labor activist Frank Little. The Roadside Stand has a locked cash box and an unlocked change box with a bunch of dollar bills. They also accept Venmo. “The honor system works well, because most people are honest.”

As the summer plays out, there will be a lot of regional differences in how fresh produce gets distributed. But as long as the honor system holds, neighborhood farmstands could become an important link in many new food supply chains — with or without a global pandemic.

“I don’t know anyone who has put up a stand and not done well with it,” Potter-Fins said. The hardest part, she says, is letting them know you exist. “It will be interesting to see if we get any traffic,” she said. While the internet has the potential to bring in the most business, and may transform her farmstand into an order pickup depot, feeding the community remains an essential mission of the farms.  To that end, Potter-Fins has a local marketing plan.

“I’ll put a sign at the communal mailboxes, letting people know we are here, and one at the bar,” she says.

In Huson, Montana, that counts as total saturation.