

Save traditional cheese production -- buy directly -- survey shows difficult times for farmers.

Boston, MA. July 8, 2020.

The American Cheese Society surveyed nearly 1,000 cheese professionals in the United States at the start of the pandemic caused by COVID19 to better understand the issues ahead for the national cheese industry. In association with the Oldways Cheese Coalition and regional cheese guilds the survey gathered information from cheesemakers, distributors, retailers, and professionals. The information was analyzed by Dr. Heather Paxson from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a team of students.

According to the data generated, 81% of cheese producers surveyed experienced a decline in overall sales in mid-April 2020, compared to the same time in 2019, with nearly half reporting a greater than 50% decline in sales. Much of the loss came from the shuttering of restaurants (85% of cheese producers lost sales to restaurants) and the closing of foodservice in schools, workplace cafeterias, catering, etc.

One farmstead producer reported that, “monthly sales to our distributor dropped from \$6,000 to \$700. Cheese is 80% of our business. Our online sales for goat milk soaps, and specialty maple products increased.”

In addition, 48% of cheese producers reported a loss of future orders, while 22% reported inventory loss in the month of April. Inventory loss was just one of the ways producers were negatively impacted. Others reported disposing of unprocessed milk and downsizing herds.

As “essential services,” retail grocery stores have remained open — 51% of survey respondents working in retail reported an overall increase in sales for mid-April 2020, as compared to the previous year. However, those increases have not been evenly distributed across product sectors.

There has been a dramatic shift to pre-cut and wrapped cheeses, away from cut-to-order in retail stores. In losing the ability to sample products or communicate face-to-face with customers, this safety measure also means a lost opportunity to introduce customers to new cheeses — and cheesemakers.

The shift to more pre-cut and wrapped cheeses is requested by supermarkets in response to consumer’s demands. A distributor reported that “most retailers are wanting only pre-cut cheeses now and don't anticipate using cheesemongers any longer.”

It also translates into reduced need for skilled labor in cheese retail. Indeed, cheesemongers reported the most concern about their own job security.

“I'm worried that due to the higher cost of quality Artisanal cheese that I will lose my job. Customers are trying to budget the best they can and buying an expensive, yet tasty and worthy cheese is not a part of that budget.” (Retailer, cheesemonger)

With a spike in new infections around the country, the cheese industry remains worried that some of the issues experienced during March and April may return during the end of the summer and the fall when sales for cheese are historically higher.

To see more survey results, visit the American Cheese Society at cheesesociety.org – To find a store or producer near you visit the Oldways Cheese Coalition directory at <https://oldwayspt.org/programs/oldways-cheese-coalition/learn/cheese-store-directory>

For more information please contact:

Karen Lundquist, Executive Director of the American Cheese Society

Tel. +1.612.644.7409 – klundquist@cheesesociety.org

The American Cheese Society provides the cheese industry with educational resources and networking opportunities, while encouraging the highest standards of cheesemaking focused on safety and sustainability.

Heather Paxson, PhD, William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor and Head of Anthropology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Email: paxson@mit.edu

Professor Paxson is the author *The Life of Cheese: Crafting Food and Value in America* (University of California Press, 2013), analyzing how craftwork has become a new source of cultural and economic value within American landscapes of production and consumption. Her current work concerns the practical and semiotic work of moving perishable foods across international borders.

Carlos Yescas, Program Director of the Oldways Cheese Coalition

Tel. +1.347.302.7537 – carlos@oldwayspt.org

The Oldways Cheese Coalition (OCC) advocates for traditional cheeses as safe, delicious, and culturally and historically significant. We work to ensure that traditional cheeses and artisanal cheesemaking practices are maintained for future generations.