

COVID Crisis Sparks a Reimagining of Maui's Food System

The loss of tourism served as a catalyst to create a food hub and a new local food system infrastructure

AUTUMN NESS

As Maui continues to struggle with the impacts of COVID-19 related shutdowns, a new nonprofit has linked arms with Maui's small farms to support them through the crisis, while also laying the foundation for long-term food system change. Tourism shut down in March 2020, causing reduced demand for local produce from hotels and restaurants, while crowds were showing up at big box stores, buying food shipped in from all over the world, leaving store shelves empty.

Community leaders quickly organized to connect local consumers to Maui's farmers through the Maui Hub, an on-line "farmers market" where consumers can buy vegetables and other locally produced goods directly from the producer. The food hub is a consumer-friendly platform that also focuses on meeting the immediate needs of our small farms.

CONNECTING CONSUMERS WITH FARMERS

The response from the community and the farmers has been truly amazing. From the first week of operation in April 2020, during the height of lockdown chaos and anxiety, the Maui community stepped up to support our local farmers, and sales have increased nearly every week since. The Maui Hub team focuses on making the farmers' experience as easy as possible, by taking their delivery and paying them right away, so they can go back to the farm while community people do the rest of the work to get their produce to the consumer. The Maui Hub focuses on sales, marketing, and consumer education so we have more engaged and informed customers. We ask farmers what they need, and we do what we can to provide it.

We are also creating jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities in an economic sector that can no longer rely on tourism. We employ a packing and delivery crew, and help aspiring product entrepreneurs find gaps in the food market and connect them to farmers who grow what they need.

BUILDING A LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM INFRASTRUCTURE

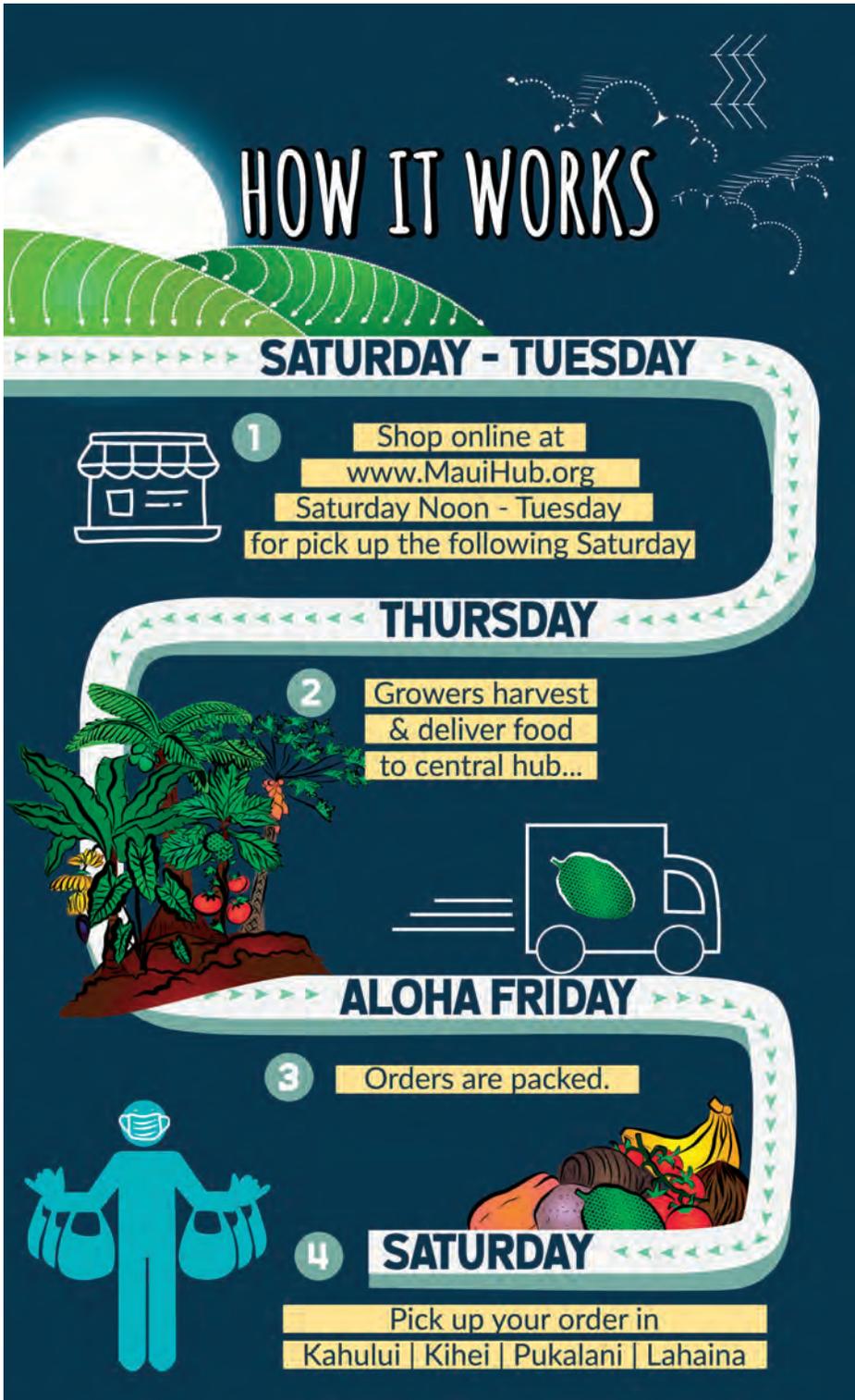
The relationships we are building with our farmers will also give us the chance to support their conversion to organic



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Poster artwork: Michelle Halcomb, Three Kisses Design

This poster advertises to residents of Maui how the food hub operates. Autumn Ness, director of Beyond Pesticides' Organic Land Management Program, helped join the farm community with consumers to advance food security and sovereignty on the island.

practices, as we now have the metrics to prove that Maui consumers want more organic produce. Building a local food economy, while also making sure our future is organic, is a win-win, that was less possible before COVID.

Maui has actually needed better infrastructure to support locally produced food for years. Without it, many farmers and producers have been largely on their own when it comes to selling and distributing their produce. When individual farmers have to manage the sales, aggregation, delivery, and invoicing for their products, that means they have much less time on their farm. This has been the topic of policy discussions and farm needs assessments for years, but there was never the political will or the resources dedicated to building out a functioning food hub.

A sustainable food system depends on collaboration, farm support, and informed consumers. We can no longer expect farmers to shoulder 100% of the burden of feeding our communities. They need support. If we restructure our food system with these core values, our farmers have the tools they need to increase their food production, creating jobs and making Maui more food secure.

The future of our food system, as well as the long-term health of our people and local economy, depends on the choices we make during this pandemic, and how we turn those choices into long-term systemic change.

Beyond Pesticides Hawai'i has always been actively involved in supporting our local organic farmers, but the pandemic put their challenges front and center. We are proud to be part of the Maui Hub team, and proud of our community and our farmers for the work they put in to getting our community through the pandemic, while also keeping an eye on the horizon.

Food security and a diversified economy has never been so urgent and through collaboration and values-based solutions, we are moving in the right direction.

Together, we are Maui strong.

To find out more about the Maui Food Hub, visit www.mauihub.org.