

For Immediate Release
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**A NATIONAL NON-PROFIT THAT SUPPORTS VETERANS-TURNED-FARMERS
SEES THIS AS A MOMENT OF GREAT OPPORTUNITY FOR SMALL,
INDEPENDENT FARMS**

Farmer veterans across the country are adapting to serve their local communities in this time of need.



As the world reels from the COVID-19 pandemic, one group of Americans is providing the fuel to keep us going – our farmers. Planting cannot be postponed. Birthing animals cannot be canceled. Springtime does not wait until next year.

Yet many small, independent farmers are getting hit hard. Farmers markets are closing. Farm-to-school programs are shutting down. Restaurant movement is significantly reduced. The impact has been a gut-punch of immediate loss of business for small and mid-size producers, who will not be seeing the financial help that will likely go to the banks, the airlines or the cruise ship industries.

But one thing is for sure. People – all of us – need to eat. While there are many things we can let go of, food is not one. As supermarkets are sold out and customers stand in line to meet their basic nutritional needs, a growing number of people are looking to their local farms. We need our farmers to keep us healthy through this crisis and we will need them to help us rebuild our economy when we come out of this.

One national non-profit group – the Farmer Veteran Coalition (FVC) which helps veterans pursue careers in agriculture – sees this time of uncertainty as a moment of great opportunity. Headquartered in Davis, California, their membership includes nearly 20,000 farmer veterans across America. Many of them operate their own independent farms that are taking a hard hit. But that hasn't stopped them from re-inventing the wheel.

“If anyone can overcome and adapt, it's our farmer veterans. Their military training has prepared them for this,” Natalie Monroe, Communications Director at FVC, proudly shares. “Our job is to help them continue to do just that.”

And many have adapted. Already in a few short days, several members have sprung into swift action. They have implemented innovative ways to make fresh food more accessible to their local communities, through online ordering and alternate delivery methods. Their mood has shifted from that of immediate distress to one of growth and even hope.

One such success story is Zamora Flora, a husband and wife team in Woodland, California. Cal and Aubrienne Zamora found themselves in a place of overwhelming dread just a week ago, as the closure of farmers markets signaled a dire situation for their little flower and vegetable farm that was bursting with freshly-harvested tulips.

“This couldn't come at a worse time for us. It's when we should be making a large portion of our annual income, when we're already paying for early irrigation water (that doesn't normally happen until April), and when we have a boom of tulips and very limited cooler space,” Cal reflected. He's a former Marine who served for five years including a deployment to Iraq in 2007.

Inspired to try something new to stay afloat, the flower growers polled their followers. Practically overnight, Zamora Flora rolled out a doorstep delivery service. Then the magic started to happen. In just over 24 hours, they sold all of the tulips they had available.

“It's uplifting to see all these folks spreading joy throughout their communities and a relief that our tulips will soon be in your homes,” beamed a deeply moved Aubrienne, who has military ties of her own – she was born at Mather Air Force Base in Sacramento. She took to their business Facebook page to post photos of the “sneak attack” doorstep bouquet deliveries with the hashtag #spreadjoynotCOVID19.

The best part - this may morph into the launch of a CSA program for their farm. An unexpected surprise. Uncertain times create moments of great opportunity.

The Zamoras have been helped along the way by Farmer Veteran Coalition. They sell their specialty flowers under the *Homegrown By Heroes* label, a powerful marketing tool for nearly 2,000 veteran-operated farms across the country. In 2016, FVC paid the tuition for Cal to attend the Center For Land-Based Learning's Farm Academy in Winters and also awarded him a \$3,000 Fellowship Fund grant which he used to purchase hand tools and supplies from Johnny's Selected Seeds.

An annual small grant, the Farmer Veteran Fellowship Fund is the program that FVC has identified as the single best way to help farmer veterans with their agricultural endeavors. The grant directly purchases a piece of equipment that the farmer has identified as crucial to their operation. Since 2011, FVC has awarded equipment to over 600 members totaling nearly \$2.5 million.

For hundreds of members already, the grant has single-handedly made the difference in the launch of their farming operation. Members like Alex Jauregui, also of Woodland, who lost both legs when he stepped on an IED in Afghanistan during his fourth combat tour as an Army infantryman.

Jauregui has found healing through beekeeping. His 'Fury Bees' pollination business is therapeutic and makes him feel enabled. Last year, FVC spearheaded the purchase of a neon green Hummerbee forklift for Alex jointly with two other veteran organizations – Work Vessels for Veterans and Semper Fi Fund.

For Michael O'Gorman – the project's Founder and Executive Director – adding more faces to this growing collection of Fellowship awardees is perhaps his most significant achievement. This, even for a man who helped build three of the country's largest organic vegetable farms over his decades-long career in agriculture. In 2008, he founded Farmer Veteran Coalition out of the back of his pickup.

“Sharing this opportunity with men and women returning home from war has been a wonderful and humbling experience. It has been an honor serving those who have served us. Each face has a story to tell: a story of military service, a story of agricultural service. Their stories are downright inspirational. These farmer veterans are selfless and service-minded. They ask for very little.”

Selfless and service-minded, just like Chad Butters – Army veteran of 25 years who founded Eight Oaks Farm Distillery in Pennsylvania. Eight Oaks, also certified *Homegrown by Heroes*, has temporarily halted production of their spirits to instead shift their facility to making alcohol-based disinfectant for local charity groups in need.

“We’re trying to continue to provide a paycheck for our employees and support our community however we can do that,” relayed Butters, who is consistently recognized for being a positive force in his community through charitable acts. “We are grateful for our crew and our community that has stepped up in this time of crisis. Instead of fear and panic they show urgency and purpose.” The team at Eight Oaks has already pumped out 4,000 bottles of sanitizer and expects to ramp up to 40,000 a week. Uncertain times bring moments of great opportunity.

Yet for all the optimism O’Gorman feels, it’s sandwiched between this stark realization – “Our veterans put their lives on the line to protect us. Now their livelihoods as farmers are on the line.” – and another alarming reality. Earlier this month applications flooded in for the 2020 Fellowship Fund – a record 450 applicants, the most ever in the program’s history. FVC only has funds to award a very small fraction.

The candidate stats are staggering. At least 77% have deployed. That includes 30 individuals who have deployed more than 6 times each, and 17 individuals who deployed more than 9 times each; that’s 333 deployments between just a few dozen applicants. An overwhelming 68% of the pool has a service-connected disability. While the organization can’t award every deserving candidate, they are actively raising funds to help as many as possible. Farmers who will in turn put food on our tables.

And so, as we find ourselves in these unknown times of social distancing, FVC’s mission is paramount now more than ever before – *Mobilize veterans to feed America*. These farmer veterans have served their country twice – once by defending it, and a second time by feeding it. Farming offers new purpose to veterans in their return to civilian life, and their dedication in the field fuels us at home. In this moment, amid all the fear and commotion, their new mission to feed the country has taken on an even deeper significance.

But uncertain times breed great opportunity, and with veterans like Cal Zamora, Alex Jauregui, and Chad Butters, the future of American agriculture looks bright.

About Farmer Veteran Coalition

The mission of Farmer Veteran Coalition (FVC) is mobilizing veterans to feed America. A national non-profit charity, it helps veterans pursue careers in farming or related agricultural professions. FVC fosters the collaboration of the farming and military communities and cultivates a new generation of farmers and food leaders. Rooted in their strong belief that veterans possess the unique skills and character needed to strengthen rural communities and create sustainable food systems, FVC recognizes that agriculture additionally offers veterans purpose, opportunity, and physical and psychological benefits. To contribute to the Fellowship Fund fundraiser campaign, visit www.farmvetco.org/donate or to follow along with member stories, find FVC on Facebook at @FarmerVeteranCoalition and Twitter at @FarmVetCo.