



New study looks at Hurricane Florence impact on food chain

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Hurricane Florence impacted local food chains across eastern North Carolina in ways both large and small, from field crops destroyed by rain and wind to empty meat aisles in grocery stores and families who lost kitchen supplies to power outages.

Lauren Clay, an assistant professor in the Health Services Administration Department at D'Youville College in Buffalo, NY, is part of a team conducting the Hurricane Florence Food Study in county's affected by the storm. The purpose of the study is to help better understand how disasters impact food production, processing, transportation and availability. The two year study is funded by the National Academy of Science Engineering and Medicine through the Gulf Research Program, which aims to establish science to help communities, industry and the environment exist in harmony.

The Sun Journal sat down with Clay Friday to discuss the Hurricane Florence Food Study and its goals for Craven County and other impacted areas in the state.

Sun Journal: Explain the purpose of the Hurricane Florence Food Study.

Lauren Clay: "The purpose of the study is to investigate the impact of a hurricane on local food systems, from farmers growing the food to families putting food on the table. Nobody has really studied this in a U.S. setting before, so we're looking at, when a disaster happens, what are those impacts across the system."

S.J.: What specific areas are you looking at in the study?

L.C.: "We're speaking with farmers, people working the movement of the transportation of food, people in the retail food environment as well as families putting food on the table. For farmers we're interested in losses related to the

hurricane, the challenges they've experienced, the processes that they're going through. In the retail environment in a post disaster setting the issues are different, it's how to stock your shelves, what are the changes in consumer behavior that result from a disaster. On the family side we're interested in understanding what the impacts are, whether you lost electricity and had to restock your refrigerator and freezer, if you evacuated and had to expend your resources or you lost your kitchen because your home was damaged, that's all going to have impact on your ability to put food on the table and the quality of the nutrition."

S.J.: How is this data being gathered?

L.C.: "It's a mixed methods approach. This is the third wave of data collection. I put a team here starting the Wednesday after the storm. They were here for a week and we talked to farmers, retailers and people in the community through interviews, followed by a brief survey. We came back in October to follow up with organizations that were active in food-related response, providing either a hot meal or non-perishables. This is the third wave. We've been here since Friday, and the focus is talking with farmers and families primarily. They're participating in interviews about their experiences as well as completing a survey."

S.J.: How many local individuals and families have you spoken with for the study?

L.C.: "I would venture that right now we're probably at about 60 families and farmers and about 30 organizations working to meet community food needs."

S.J.: How does the study proceed from here?

L.C.: "We plan to continue following New Bern and eastern North Carolina through the first year at least. Next, we'll be back in April for some follow-up. We're planning a survey that will be guided by the experiences that people have shared here in the New Bern area, but it will go out to all of the affected counties in North Carolina.

"What we learn here we'll take into a new disaster event in a new community and see if the issues are the same or if things are different based on geography, or the size of the community or the type of hazard."

S.J.: Once the information has been compiled what is the next step?

L.C.: “Identifying issues in the food system will enable us to advocate for better disaster response and recovery policies and programs. The aim is to make it easier for families in the future who are affected by disasters to be healthy and recover.”

S.J.: What are your initial impressions of the impact Hurricane Florence has had on area food systems?

L.C.: “The nutritional impact is huge. It’s not only families that have had property damage, but thinking about all of the people who were working in response trying to take in neighbors. Now all of a sudden you’re having to stretch your meals a little bit further to feed quite a few more mouths. We’ve talked to people who were volunteering, who were serving food, who said at the end of the day they were so exhausted they’d just go to sleep rather than cook something for themselves. The impact is not always immediately apparent to folks but it is wide spread.”

S.J.: What are some of the most pressing food-related issues our region is facing in 2019?

L.C.: “Some people aren’t aware of food-related issues even in non-disaster times. Based on 2017 data, one in eight Americans experienced food insecurity during the year, which translates to about 40 million Americans, including about 12 million children. In North Carolina, almost one in five children experience hunger on a regular basis, and broadly speaking one in seven residents experience food insecurity. In Craven County a little over 15 percent of the population, and 21.6 percent of children, experience food insecurity, which is about 16,000 people.”