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United Fresh kicks off its virtual convention

By

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At noon EDT today, June 15, United Fresh Produce Association President and CEO Tom Stenzel welcomed an on-line audience to the industry's first major virtual convention by applauding the front line field and plant workers that have kept the food supply chain relatively intact during these challenging times.

Also participating in the Grand Opening session of United Fresh 2020 Live was United Fresh Chairman of the Board Michael Muzyk of Baldor, who compared United Fresh's pivot to a virtual convention with his company's switching its focus from foodservice to home delivery and retail distribution because of the restaurant shutdowns due to COVID-19.

The keynote speaker was Katie Fitzgerald, executive vice president and chief operating officer of the national Feeding America organization, who gave a sobering assessment of food insecurity in America predicting that there will be an 8 million meal gap between need and what private and government programs can provide over the next 12 months.

Stenzel said 75 countries and every time zone in the world is represented as attendees and/or exhibitors at this year's virtual meeting. He explained how to navigate the expo "floor" and reported that the exhibits will be open 24/7 throughout the summer. Each booth will either have a live

representative or can get back to visitors through messaging. He encouraged the audience to walk the floor.

Muzyk applauded United Fresh's effort to pivot to this on-line event once the in-person convention scheduled for this week in San Diego, CA, became impossible to hold. Quoting Charles Darwin, Muzyk said it is not the strongest nor the most intelligent that survive, "it's those that have the ability to adapt to change."

Baldor has added a beefed-up home delivery service with 100,000 consumers signing up to supplant its mostly restaurant distribution business. It has also partnered with retailers using its 300-truck fleet for direct store delivery of 24 staple produce items. He said he could not predict who would be the specific winners and losers when the dust settles from this pandemic, but did say that food will win, dusting off the concept that that category itself is recession proof.

Fitzgerald, who assumed her spot at the helm of Feeding America just five months ago, reported on the excellent service that food banks and other deliverers of food to the needy have provided since March 1. She noted that the Feeding American network, which encompasses every county in all 50 states, has provided 1.3 billion meals in the past three-and-a-half months, which represents a 40 percent increase over the previous year.

But it has not been enough. She said the pandemic and the resulting layoffs have produced a population in which one out of six adults and one out of four children are food insecure, meaning they do not have the financial ability to fill their own personal food needs.

Fitzgerald outlined the herculean efforts being undertaken to capture excess food but said donations were initially down by 70 percent. Though that is improving, she predicted that economic recovery would be slow, and the demand will outdistance the ability of private organizations to meet it. "We need a significant state and federal government response," she said.

She applauded the money already allocated in the first two stimulus packages but said much more will be needed.

Fitzgerald specifically advocated for more funds in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, calling for a 15 percent increase in benefits and an increase in the minimum benefit from \$16 to \$30. While food banks do a good job in supplying food to the needy, she said they pale in comparison to what SNAP can accomplish.

"The pandemic has shown us how close to food insecurity most Americans are," she said. "Most

Americans are only two to three paychecks away.”

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