



# A Regional Food Justice Response to Farmers and Families during COVID-19

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite being one of the wealthiest regions in the U.S., the Bay Area is home to hundreds of thousands of people who experience food insecurity. Like other indicators of health, there are troubling racial and economic disparities in healthy food access, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, our project partner Fresh Approach and other non-profit organizations secured USDA Farmers to Families contracts and developed an alternative model to the conventional approach of large distributors and food banks. In this model, community-based organizations and farms purchased food from local farms, assembled crops from various farms into produce boxes, and then distributed the boxes through Bay Area community-based urban empowerment organizations, who disseminated the food to the community members in need. This program, called the Farm Fresh Food Relief (FFFR) initiative, showcases increased connectivity and infrastructural capacity amongst local farmers to jointly source, aggregate, and distribute. Our study aims to assess the extent to which this project represents a working model for how local food systems could offer a more resilient, ecologically sustainable and just response that quickly activates emergency relief efforts at scale.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the impacts of COVID-19 on regional farms connected with the Farm Fresh Food Relief (FFFR) program?
2. How is the program addressing environmental, racial and gender justice?
3. What are the opportunities and barriers for using this as a scalable model?

## METHODS

We used a mixed methods participatory action research approach (Figure 1) to our research in order to answer the complexities of our research questions and to highlight the strengths of research team members.

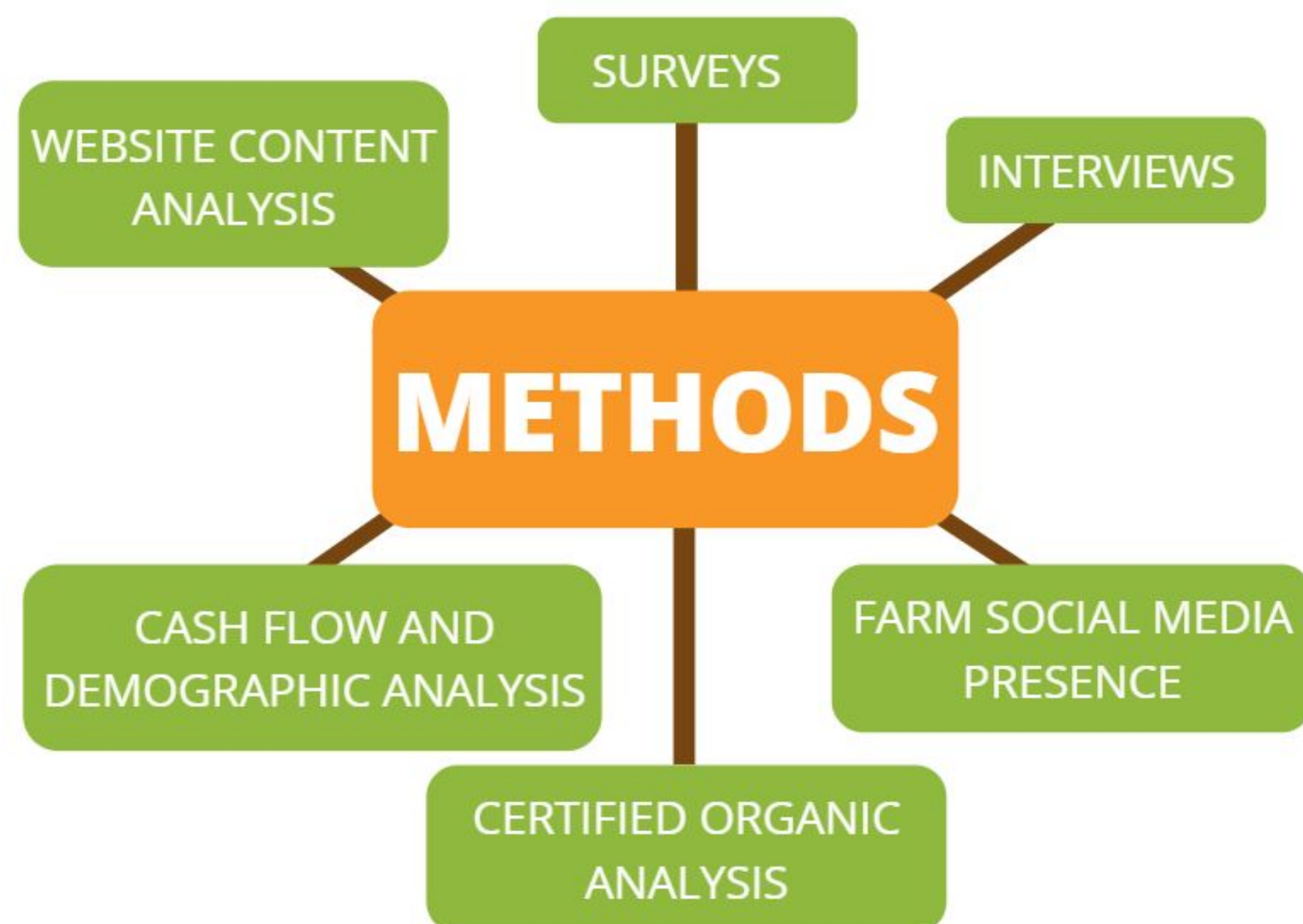


Figure 1. Mixed Methods Visualization

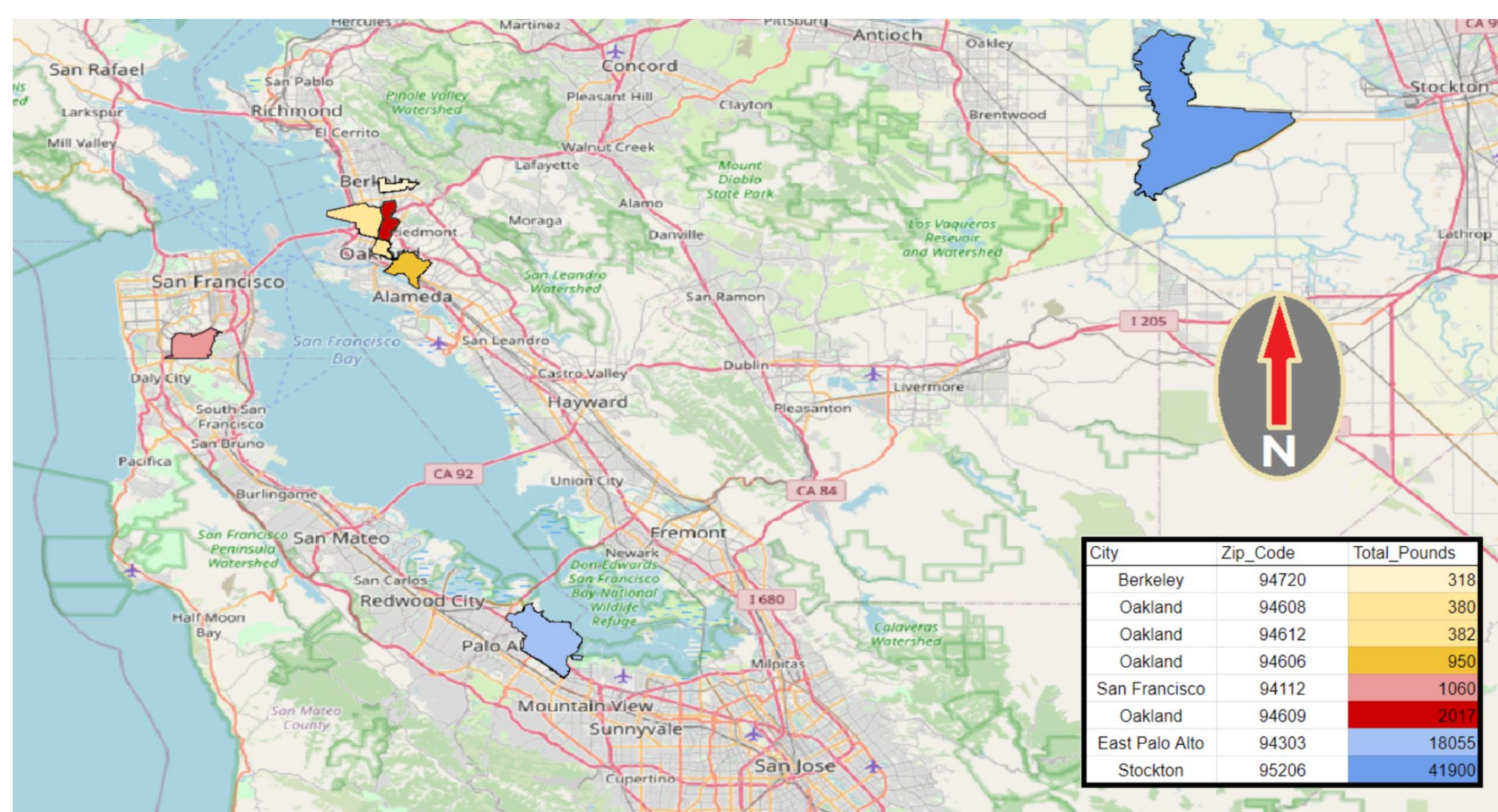


Figure 2. Map of cities and quantity of food distributed by FFR

## BOX PROGRAM BREAKDOWN



## FINDINGS

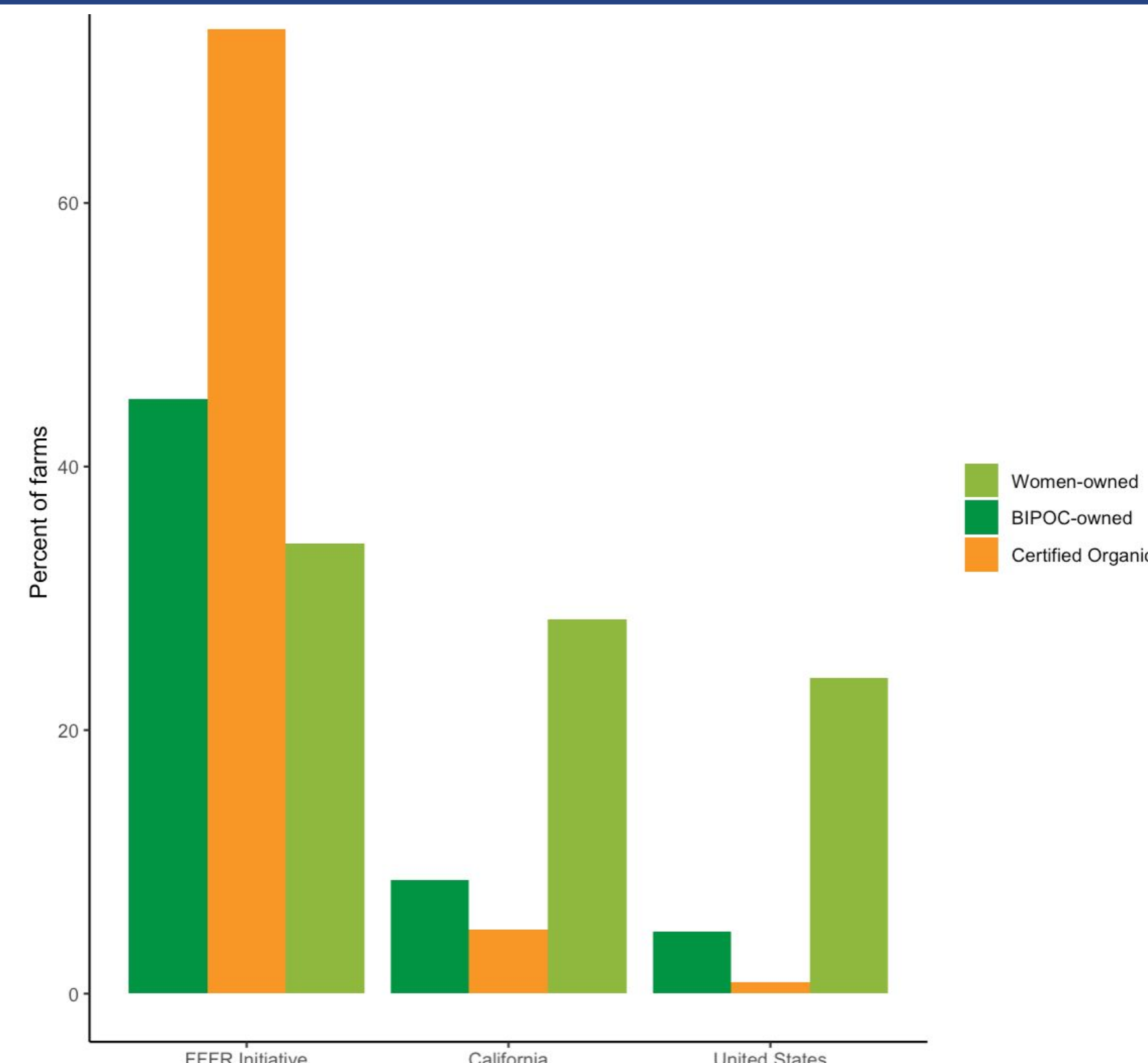


Figure 3. Percent of farms that participated in the FFR Initiative (n=82) that meet selected environmental and social-justice oriented criteria compared to that of the farms in California (n=70,521) and in the United States (n=2,042,220).

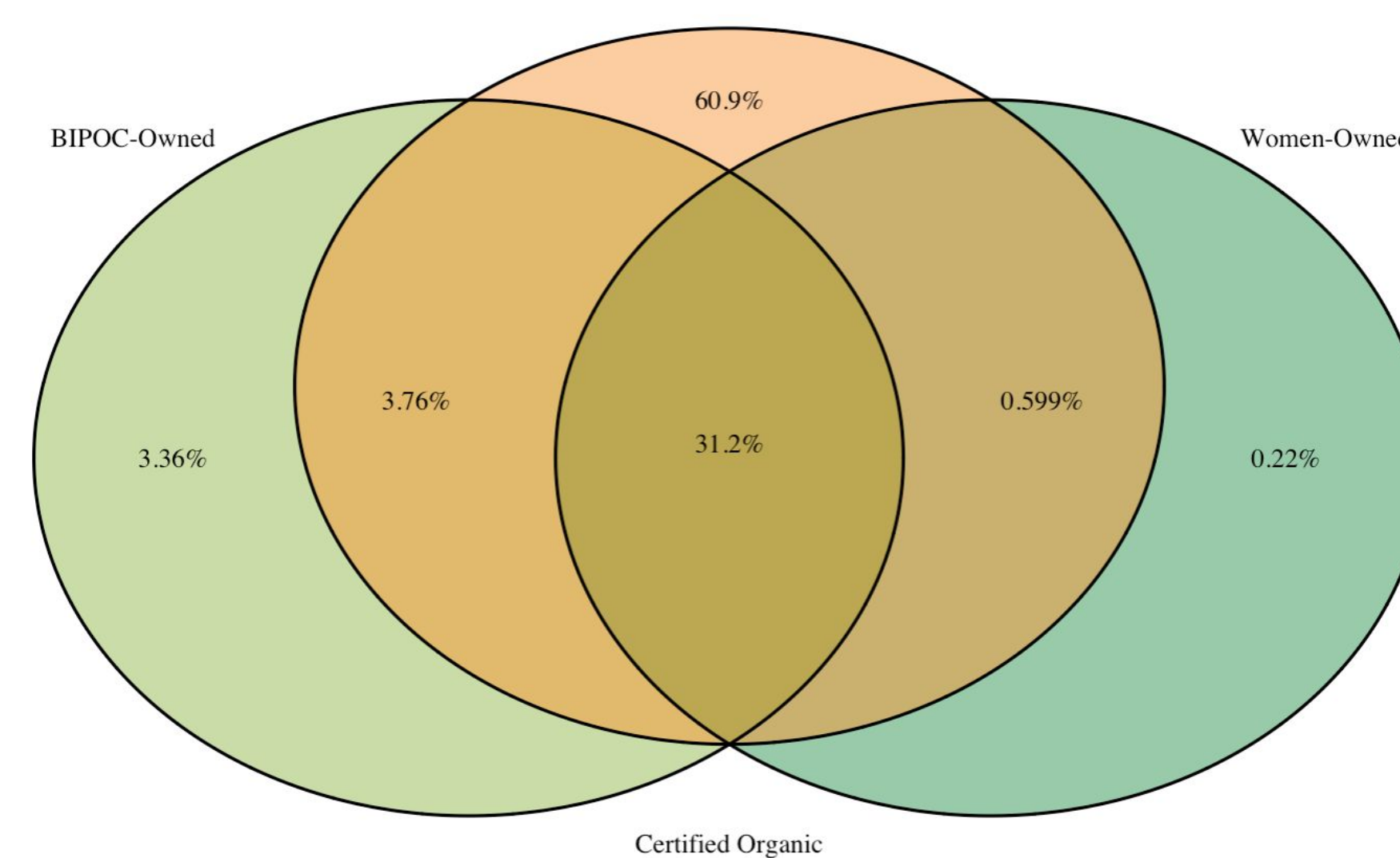


Figure 4. Produce purchases made by the eight participating food hubs displayed as percentage of spending at farms (n= \$1,362,691) with selected environmental & social-justice-oriented criteria. Notes: Percent spending @ farms that don't meet criteria is omitted.

## Pie Ranch: Food Hub Case Study

Pie Ranch, one of the central food hubs and a project partner, has a mission to cultivate a healthy and just food system from seed to table through food education, farmer training, and regional partnerships. To assess how well Pie Ranch met its mission, a qualitative content analysis of pieranch.org and the websites of five of their food distribution organizations: Ecumenical Hunger Project, Homey, Pescadero Elementary School, Project Open Hand, and Puente de la Costa Sur.

Most common codes:	
#1	community building
#2	strengthening partnerships
#3	education
#4	improving health
#5	food justice

Figure 5. The five most recurring codes in the content analysis of Pie Ranch and food distributor websites.

"Pie Ranch, and the other food hubs were the most important.... It is a very favorable market for the small farmer because the sales are direct ... the total payment arrives where it should go -- to the small farmer."

"[Farms involved in the program] would...likely not have been able to continue unless they found some type of new strategy, new outlet for their product."

Figure 6. Key quotes from farmer interviews.

## Conclusions and Next Steps

Although the research team is continuing to conduct and code farmer, food hub, and stakeholder interviews across the full breadth of this project, several preliminary conclusion have emerged:

- Many of the small farm operators interviewed experienced economic hardship, and some faced bankruptcy, due to loss of sales to restaurants during early phase COVID lockdowns. FFR paid better prices and offered new market channel for emergency food assistance significantly helping sustain these farms during challenging times.
- The rapid activation of this network provided fresh produce to >14,000 families.
- Comparative analysis of sourcing data (Figs. 3 and 4) shows that FFR's purchases prioritize environmental and gender justice criteria as evidenced by the significantly higher percent of food sourced from organic, women-owned, and BIPOC led farms.

Conclusions from case study show that Pie Ranch quickly responded to the threats posed by the pandemic and wildfires by implementing a transition from an educational farm to a justice-oriented production farm and food hub. Our analysis also finds that Pie Ranch demonstrated a strong commitment to its values, goals, and the community well-being.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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