

OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

Navigating COVID-19 on the Farm

Best practices for Daily Management of Sanitation, Deliveries, Equipment Repairs, and People

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Best practices for limiting exposure and risks related to coronavirus. Information changes quickly in the face of the multiple unknowns of this pandemic, but looking at ideas on how to navigate a normal workday on the farm will foster continued viability. In the face of a public health emergency and an economic crisis a farm business needs set for continued.

Where can an individual farm or operation start?

Start by examining and planning for four areas of concern.

- Contingency
- Keeping Family and Employees Safe
- Equipment Use and Sanitation
- Deliveries and on-Site Custom Services

Contingency plans or continuity of business plans keep operations running smoothly in case of any disruption. According to a current online poll conducted by DTN and data analytics company Farm Market iD, more than 69% of farmers polled don't have a prepared backup plan should they become sick with the virus themselves. Farms need to plan for the foreseeable future. A vaccine will not be available for 12 to 18 months, and the impacts of this novel virus have the potential to take an operation under. Planning will decrease some of the slow downs an operation can suffer. Lack of continuity planning can result in a cascade of failure.

- Insufficient operational resources
- Loss of workforce
- Worker who might not be adequately trained for tasks
- Lack of someone with operational knowledge
- Crop or product waste

Contingency Planning

Prepare written documentation of your business operations in case of illness. Communicate the plan to family or another person who can step in. On a small farm the owner may be the sole operator, or alternatively the sole caregivers should a spouse or family member fall ill, putting that operation at greater risk if a disruption occurs.

Identify the critical functions of all sectors of your business.

- Agronomic
- Livestock
- Marketing
- Finance
- Human Resources

Make sure you walk through different scenarios for the farm. Include contacts for veterinary care, equipment service, feed and seed supply. Map out the farm property, including all rented ground and buildings. Note whether or not you have any tenants in housing and what the agreements are for payment.

Do the employees or neighbors identified to help have the necessary understanding of the operation and the appropriate training to do the job? Do they have access to the all needed information? Like passwords to important accounts. Can bills be paid? Gates unlocked? Are keys needed for any equipment?

Keeping Family and Employees Safe

Start with the basics, all of the CDC guidelines -- thorough hand washing, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home when sick. Then build from there.



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- Make sure to provide a place where employees can wash hands and have disposable towels available.
- Provide alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol for remote locations.
- Discourage workers from using other workers' phones, desks, offices, or other work tools and equipment, when possible.
- Discourage sharing of any food or beverages.
- Maintain regular housekeeping practices, including routine cleaning and disinfecting of surfaces, equipment, and other elements of the work environment.

Post easy to follow guidelines for your employees in commonly utilized spaces. The CDC has printable resources online. Talk with employees about coronavirus to gauge their understanding and concerns. Keeping communications lines open will help each operation refine and make changes to new procedures.

Establish plans of work for employees built around health and safety considerations.

- Assign jobs/tasks that can be done without the presence of another, if possible.
- Instruct employees to physically distance six feet if a shared worksite is necessary.
- Remember workers may be asymptomatic and physically difficult work activity can cause spread of droplets outside the recommended six feet of distancing. Take special precautions when assigning heavy labor tasks.
- Utilize separate transportation.
- Consider grouping employees to work in teams, to limit individual exposure.

Levels of risk associated with various jobs workers perform can differ and consideration must be given to where, how, and to what sources of coronavirus might workers be exposed. This will allow for appropriate plans to be made and protective mechanisms to be put in place in advance of those exposures. Will an employee come into contact with the general public, customers, elevator or ag business employees, on-site service providers, or coworkers? What about off of the farm in non-work environments? Do some of your employees face high exposure risks at home because of a spouse's work setting?

Keeping family and employees safe will require the establishment of protocols for sanitizing common gathering places like the shop, lunch areas, and offices spaces on the farm property. Cleaning and disinfecting high touch areas like -- door handles, phones, keyboards, light switches, monitors/ touchpads, faucets/sinks, and restroom areas.

Equipment Use and Sanitation Plans

An optimal equipment use plan would allow for a single operator to reduce virus spread. The goal should be to put steps in place to:

- Eliminate ride sharing in all vehicles if possible
- Sanitize each operator cabin upon entry and departure
- Provide cleaning supplies for each tractor/employee

On all tractors and equipment, touch points should be sanitized. Include exterior handrails or grab bars, doorknobs or handles, the steering wheel, controls, handles to open windows, the key or start button, and the seat. Consider exterior equipment points with high touches as well, like hydraulic connections, hitch pins, 3-point hitch connection points, and the PTO.

Deliveries and On-Site Custom Services

Identify and coordinate a drop-off location for supplier deliveries, away from on-farm high traffic areas and housing. Create specific instructions for drop-off deliveries.

- Provide the location and all procedures needed at the drop-off point.
- Create signage to easily identify drop-off points.
- List all point of contacts with contact information to assist with questions leading up to delivery and upon arrival.
- Practice distancing with delivery drivers. Avoiding personal interaction is best.

When an outside source will be providing on-site services make a plan before their arrival. Instruct technicians, mechanics, and applicators to utilize their own transportation to and from the field if the work or service is to be performed off site.

Useful References

- Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19*, <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf>
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- COVID-19 Guidance for farm employers*, <https://farms.extension.wisc.edu/covid-19-guidance-for-farm-employers/?fbclid=IwAR0eWUgzsqbqEkYP4hWt2gVE8QRH5ca-Jzdw-pd5NA6icCrM0uXCfYZzxTj4>
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