



FOOD SAFETY

Management of Farm Labor During COVID-19 Pandemic

Scott Monroe

*Food Safety Extension
Educator*

Amanda Deering

*Clinical Assistant
Professor, Food Science*

Tari Gary

*Food Safety Outreach
Coordinator,
Indiana State Department
of Agriculture*

Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic is presenting unique challenges for all industries, including produce farming. Since agriculture is part of essential infrastructure in our country, produce growers must take steps to limit the spread of COVID-19 among their farm workforce so they can successfully harvest produce to feed our population. Many of the suggestions highlighted in this document are already incorporated into farms' food safety practices. It is important that farms enhance these practices and employ ingenuity to monitor and maintain worker health.

Following CDC Guidelines

Farms should review CDC guidelines to limit the spread of COVID-19. Those guidelines can be found here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>.

These guidelines include:

- Social distancing, keeping workers at least 6 feet apart.
- Washing your hands often, especially after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Stay home if you are sick.

Social Distancing on the Farm

Growers should ask, "How does that look on my farm?" To maintain distance between workers, supervisors may stagger work schedules, or stagger workers within a work area. Growers should also limit activity in break areas, and clean and sanitize common areas often.

If the nature of a task does not allow workers to maintain a safe distance from one another, supervisors may consider the

use of personal protective equipment (PPE) to create a barrier between workers. This PPE may include face masks, gloves, and goggles. Since PPE is in short supply during the current pandemic, growers are encouraged to repurpose PPE that is already on the farm, such as dust masks, face shields, and nitrile gloves for use when handling chemicals. PPE, if possible, must be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized after every use. PPE that cannot be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized should be designated for use by a single employee, and it should not be shared. Directions for sanitizing PPE can be found here:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/ppe-strategy/decontamination-reuse-respirators.html>

Transportation of Workers

To maintain social distancing, supervisors may need to adjust transportation arrangements when transporting employees to work areas. It may be necessary to make multiple trips with fewer passengers to maintain 6 feet between workers. Vehicles must be cleaned and sanitized frequently. It is not recommended that workers drive their personal vehicles to the production areas. However, if this is necessary, growers should designate a parking area at the edge of the production area, away from harvesting activities.

Training Workers

It is imperative that produce farm supervisors continue to train workers on proper hygiene. Trainers should review proper handwashing technique and stress the importance of washing hands frequently. Workers should be instructed to not touch their mouth, nose, or eyes, since this is the primary way COVID-19 is spread. In addition to the current training curriculum, growers should incorporate CDC guidelines and how those look on that specific farm. Training should discuss any modifications made to meet these recommendations. Workers should be educated on COVID-19 symptoms and the importance of recognizing them. If an employee fails to self-report symptoms of illness consistent with COVID-19, they are putting the entire farm's workforce at risk. A list of COVID-19 symptoms can be found here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>

Monitoring Farm Workers

Supervisors and farm owners should monitor the health of their workers daily, regardless of harvest schedule. Farms have previously checked workers for signs of foodborne illness. While farms should continue this,

SYMPTOMS OF CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019

Patients with COVID-19 have experienced mild to severe respiratory illness.

Symptoms* can include

FEVER

COUGH

*Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure.

SHORTNESS OF BREATH

Seek medical advice if you develop symptoms, and have been in close contact with a person known to have COVID-19 or if you live in or have recently been in an area with ongoing spread of COVID-19.



03/10/20 4:00 PM

cdc.gov/COVID19-symptoms

Figure 1. CDC Symptoms of COVID-19

farms should also monitor workers for symptoms of COVID-19. Employees who exhibit symptoms consistent with COVID-19 should not be allowed to work and should seek appropriate medical care as needed. Workers who test positive for COVID-19 should be quarantined and not be permitted to return until negative test results are obtained or that individual is cleared by a physician. Trained farm supervisors should perform AND document daily health checks to ensure workers do not exhibit signs of symptoms of COVID-19. This check could include asking workers prior to their shift if they are experiencing any symptoms of respiratory illness. Farm operators may opt to take employees' temperatures using a touchless thermometer prior to work. If the individual performing the health checks is within 6 feet of employees, they should wear proper PPE to limit the spread of disease.

Overcoming Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented situation that is impacting all areas of the agriculture industry. As circumstances rapidly evolve, produce growers may be forced to modify their businesses and procedures in order to prevail. A farm's workforce is the driving force of a fruitful farming operation; therefore, maintaining workforce health is vital to this year's success.



Additional Resources

List of EPA Approved Sanitizers Effective Against Coronavirus:

<https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>

How to Make a Facemask:

<https://www.deaconess.com/How-to-make-a-Face-Mask>

Additional COVID-19 Resources on the Safe Produce IN website:

<https://ag.purdue.edu/extension/safeproduce/Pages/resources.aspx>

Purdue Extension:

<https://extension.purdue.edu/>

For More Information

Scott Monroe

Food Safety Extension Educator

812-888-7401

jmonroe@purdue.edu

Amanda Deering

Clinical Assistant Professor, Food Science

765-494-0512

adeering@purdue.edu

Tari Gary

*Food Safety Outreach Coordinator,
Indiana State Department of Agriculture*

317-407-9802

TGary@isda.in.gov