

Handling COVID-19: Produce Farms and Packinghouses¹

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While there is no evidence that the COVID-19 virus is a food safety concern, it is a worker health concern because it spreads via close person-to-person contact or by contact with contaminated surfaces. Food does not appear to be a likely cause of COVID-19 transmission, but many of the same practices used to prevent foodborne illness on foods should still be used to reduce the likelihood of COVID-19 contamination on fresh produce and the risk of COVID-19 spread among farm and packinghouse workers.

Communication to Workers

- Educate workers on COVID-19 symptoms, how it spreads, and how to reduce the spread of the disease. Instruct workers to stay home if they are sick (coughing, sore throat, fever, diarrhea, vomiting, etc.).
- Some employees may need reassurance that they will not be punished for missing work due to illness, while others may be unwilling to miss a paycheck due to illness. Have a plan and communicate in advance for how you will address these individuals (paid sick leave, etc.).
- All employees must wash their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds frequently throughout the day. This includes when they arrive to work, before handling food, after breaks, after using the restroom, and so on.

Disinfecting Equipment, Tools, and Surfaces

During COVID-19 or any other outbreak situation, increase routine cleaning and disinfecting frequency in order to protect the health of workers. Disinfecting routines also need to include administrative offices, field trucks, and break areas that are not generally included in day-to-day cleaning.

- Cleaning and disinfecting are two separate steps and should be done in order. Cleaning removes dirt and soil and often requires the use of a soap/detergent and water. Disinfecting uses a chemical to inactivate the virus on the surface.
- Shared tools should be cleaned and disinfected between uses by a different employee.
 - CDC is recommending use of disinfectants on the EPA list found at <https://go.ncsu.edu/epacovid-19>. Note: this list is based on current data, but compounds have not been validated for inactivation of the virus causing COVID-19.
 - Bleach may be used to disinfect surfaces, but the concentration required is higher for COVID-19 than for everyday sanitation: 5 tablespoons bleach per gallon of water.

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- Clean harvest baskets, bags, aprons, knives, etc. after each use. Wash fabrics with a detergent in hot water, and apply a disinfectant to nonporous surfaces. See CDC guidelines on laundry at <https://go.ncsu.edu/cdlaundry>.
- Disinfect frequently touched surfaces, including door handles, steering wheels, keyboards, touch screens, etc., throughout the day.
- Smaller operations may want to consider having designated harvest and packing crews, the members of which never cross paths during the work day. Employees in the same household should be assigned to the same crew or cohort. Cohorting reduces the risk of losing your entire workforce, such as may happen if an employee that works at the same time as all of your other employees tests positive for COVID-19.

Hygiene and Personal Protective Equipment

- Hand-sanitizing stations should supplement but not replace handwashing. Consider having sanitizer available for harvest or packing crews.
- Discourage employees from sharing phones, tools, utensils, vehicles, etc.
- Single-use gloves should be provided to all workers handling food and should be changed when contaminated (e.g., when hands touch skin or the ground). When gloves may interfere with a worker's ability to do their assigned task (e.g., harvesting, applying stickers, etc.), handwashing or hand sanitizing should occur frequently.
- Some workers may prefer to wear masks while working in close proximity with others. Masks should be allowed but not required, and workers should be instructed on how to wear them properly to prevent illness or injury.

Distancing and Cohorting

- Instruct workers to keep 6 feet away each other. Limit one employee per vehicle at a time, and instruct drivers to disinfect frequently touched surfaces within the vehicle before their shift ends.
- When physical distancing is not an option, consider dividing workers into cohorts that only work with members within that cohort for the duration of the outbreak.
 - For example, divide your packing crew into two groups that only show up for their group's designated shift. Have the first shift clean and sanitize their work areas and equipment at the end of their shift, and give a buffer of 15 to 30 minutes between the end of the first shift and beginning of the next shift to ensure employees are not in contact with each other during shift changes.