



Episode Thirty Two - COVID 19 and enhanced produce safety activities

Welcome to episode 32 of Food Safety Bites, brought to you by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and funded by the USDA Food Safety Outreach Program. This is your host Harriet Behar. This episode is **COVID 19 and enhanced produce safety activities**. In these podcast episodes, I will identify issues, and provide suggestions for how to reduce various fresh produce contamination risks and keep your customers safe.

If you have already developed and implemented produce safety activities on our farm, then much of what you can do to lessen spread the virus that causes COVID-19 is already being done. The food safety bites episodes on hand washing, worker hygiene, bodily fluids, visitors as well as cleaning and sanitizing are all pertinent to management associated with COVID 19. In addition, there are some enhanced steps you can take to both protect your workers and customers. Farms in most states are considered essential businesses, which means personnel who do not live on the farm, can go to work and customers can come to your farm as long as you are following the guidelines I will talk about here.

The virus that causes COVID 19 illness is a respiratory virus that spreads primarily through droplets during person-to-person contact when a person who is infected with the illness coughs, breathes or sneezes and the droplets are expelled, and another person breathes those droplets in. The virus might also be spread when people touch their nose, mouth or eyes after touching a surface that has been contaminated by bodily fluids from an infected person. As of August 2020, there is no evidence that food or food packaging has been associated with the virus's transmission. The good news is that things that you are likely already doing - like good worker hygiene, not working when ill, and being effective at washing hands and doing that often, are probably already part of your produce safety protocols and are effective at minimizing the spread of the virus on your farm

Setup your work activities and areas to maintain at least 6 feet of distance when workers are interacting with each other in the fields, pack shed and in the break areas. Have smaller crews working and using the break areas in shifts. This social distancing should also be practiced with members of the public at markets or farm stands, as well as any farm visitors. If workers are sharing the use of communication devices or computers such as cell phones or walk-talkies and tablets for recordkeeping, increase the frequency of cleaning and sanitizing those shared surfaces. Review the break areas and sanitize refrigerator or stove handles as well as tables and other surfaces between uses. This would include sanitizing trash can lids, doorknobs or any other hard surface that many people will be using numerous times throughout the day.

Consider splitting up the work tasks, so that there are fewer people working together at any one time or visitors on the farm. Put tape on the floor of the pack shed so workers can see where they need to stand to be physically distant from each other, and have a one way flow, so people are not crossing paths. When using hand tools, consider assigning a specific tool for each person to use, rather than sharing. If multiple people use the same tools, consider fiberglass or



plastic handled tools rather than wood, which is hard to clean and sanitize. Have a bottle of your sanitizer solution available near the tool storage and have them sanitize the tools after use.

Wear cloth face masks when possible, especially when they are working inside. Remind workers to not touch their faces when they are wearing masks, as they can be uncomfortable. Launder reusable masks when they get dirty and use single use disposable face masks only one day. Cover your coughs and sneeze into a tissue and then wash your hands.

Handwashing - Follow the good handwashing protocols discussed in the food safety bites episode on handwashing. If you don't have handwashing readily available, like if you are out making deliveries or at the farmers market without a handwashing stand, you can use alcohol based sanitizer, but sanitizer is not a replacement for handwashing and does not work if hands are visibly dirty. Make sure that you have enough handwashing stands and areas around your farm, and in the field or your vehicle to make handwashing as convenient as possible for both workers and visitors.

Illness- Make it clear to both employees and visitors on the farm, that if they are not feeling well, they should not be there. If you can offer your workers a flexible leave policy, they will be more likely to stay home when sick and let them know they will not be punished for being open about their situation at home, such as having a sick family member. Consider asking workers to take their own temperature each morning before they leave home, and if someone is sick with a fever and staying home, encourage them to get tested for COVID 19. The current CDC guideline in fall 2020, for a safe return to work is they have not had a fever and had not taken fever reducing medicine, shortness of breath or coughing for at least 72 hours. If they have access to COVID-19 testing, they should have had two consecutive negative COVID-19 tests, 24 hours apart. All symptoms should have improved from the illness and at least 7 days would have passed since their first symptoms. Other possible COVID-19 symptoms your employees should be aware of include sore throat, muscle pain, headache, chills and loss of taste and smell. Make sure to pay attention to the most up to date information from the CDC, as new symptoms are coming out regularly.

Cleaning and sanitizing surfaces- since there is some evidence COVID-19 can survive on hard surfaces, you should sanitize high-touch surfaces like light switches and cooler handles that your workers are touching throughout the day regularly. You should also continue to sanitize food contact surfaces like your sorting tables, totes and tools. It is important to remember that surfaces are not the primary way the virus is thought to transfer between people, but it is still important to do basic sanitizing of these surfaces in case a worker is ill and asymptomatic. Waxed cardboard boxes might be a vector for the virus, so it is a good idea to wipe them with a sanitizer and let them sit for a few days if you are reusing them after they left your control. Remember, you will need to occasionally clean surfaces before you sanitize them as well - you cannot just spray sanitizers on a dirty surface. Use the regular sanitizing rate on the label of your sanitizer for COVID-19 sanitizing, unless you have a confirmed case of COVID on the farm, in which case it would make sense to do a deeper clean and use the disinfecting rate on the label.



Training- Employees should be trained to these enhanced activities, and signage put up for both workers, visitors, delivery drivers etc. and where applicable remind them to wear masks, wash hands etc. Consider training workers to do multiple jobs in case someone stays home and you need an extra hand and would take someone from a different work area. This way, they would be ready to fill in with no delays. Think somewhat outside the box, perhaps use a video chat with employees over the phone, to train them to do a new job, or even for crew meetings. Send emails or have a white board with instructions for the day, rather than a large crew meeting each morning in the shed. There should be a designated person who workers report to, if they become ill on the job and a periodic check in with everyone to discuss their health and the health of their housemates.

Visitors to the farm- This is a difficult issue, especially if your farm is setup for agri-tourism and u-pick operations. Limit the number of visitors at one time however you can and make it clear that you are expecting social distancing and mask wearing to be observed. Have signage or a handout to remind people to do the right thing and provide them with accessible hand washing areas and hand sanitizer. Different states have different rules about occupancy limits on farms, so make sure to check with your department of agriculture or Extension. Some states put your farm into a different category if you do recreational activities like games, corn mazes etc, so that is something to consider and look in to.

Risk- Depending on worker's circumstances, some may be at high risk of serious illness from COVID-19 due to their age or medical conditions, and others might present a higher risk to their coworkers if they live with multiple roommates or if the people they live with work in jobs that expose them to many other people. Consider talking with your employees so you know their circumstances and perhaps set up the work crews to minimize transmission to those most vulnerable. If there are workers that already live together, consider having them also work together. Minimize the number of people sharing the use of vehicles. Some farms have made bicycles available for going to and from the field or have more than one vehicle available to transport workers and have each one vehicle serve a designated small group. Be aware to setup systems to keep everyone as safe as possible.

So that's it for this episode of Food Safety Bites, the next episode is legal and economic ramifications of food borne illness outbreaks. This is your host Harriet Behar brought to you by the University of Wisconsin Madison, talk to you next time!