

What if someone has COVID-19 on a farm? Guidelines for Farmers, Workers and Consumers

Mark Hoffmann & Chip Simmons, NC State University

A COVID-19 positive case on a farm, winery or other agritourism businesses can have significant implications for the business, employees and customers. Here, we would like to clarify some important aspects to consider if an agricultural business has a positive COVID-19 case. COVID-19 is a reportable disease and when there is a case, the business needs to contact and cooperate with the NC Department of Health and Human Services. COVID-19 is generally thought to be transmitted through person-to-person contact and from contaminated surfaces. It is important to note that COVID-19 is **not a food-borne disease**, therefore, eating fresh produce is not harmful, as Dr. Ben Chapman explains in [this video](#).

For employers (according to [NCDOL](#) and [NCDA&CS guidelines](#))

NC Department of Labor (NCDOL) urges employers and employees to be aware of their role in preventing the spread of COVID-19. Employers should follow the guidelines to: [\(1\) Prepare; \(2\) Educate; \(3\) Prevent; \(4\) Isolate; \(5\) Communicate](#). Additionally, the [NC State Fresh Produce Food Safety Team](#) has prepared a [guide on how to prepare and prevent](#) on a small produce farm.

The following describes actions a grower should take if there is a positive COVID-19 case is on the farm:

Preparation and Prevention: [Please click here for the full checklist](#)

Be Prepared and have a plan

- Have an emergency plan for how you will (1) care and (2) isolate COVID-19 infected workers.
- Identify the nearest healthcare facility that provides free or low-cost care to uninsured people.

Promote Social Distancing, Protection and Hygiene

- Educate yourself and workers about hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette and emergency responses (Spanish and English)
- Social distancing between employees can encompass differences in work flow as well as potentially impacting worker responsibilities. All of this information should be captured in an emergency plan. To protect your work force as well as yourself, the implementation of social distancing and other safety measures is highly recommended.
- Provide weekly supplies to each employee to mitigate COVID-19, such as alcohol-based hand sanitizer (if available), disinfectants and lined trash cans. Hand washing is a key to preventing the spread of COVID-19 and employers should always provide adequate hand wash facilities, stocked with soap and disposable towels for hand drying

Active Prevention

- Screen arriving employees for symptoms of COVID-19 such as fever, cough, or shortness of breath.
- Clean and sanitize your facilities frequently. In addition to routine cleaning and sanitation, it is recommended that if there is a COVID-19 positive case in the operation, all common touch surfaces, such as door knobs, bathrooms, touchscreens, etc. be disinfected with a dilute bleach solution (1,000 ppm – 5 tablespoons / gal water) or a disinfectant listed in the EPA List N: [Disinfectants for Use against SARS-COV-2](#). (SARS-COV-2 is the virus that causes COVID-19.)
- H-2A workers Housing: [Temporary Worker Housing COVID-19 Guidance](#)

If an employee has symptoms or is confirmed COVID-19

- This employee should stop working immediately
- If there is an onsite room designated for ill employees (H-2A situation), suspect COVID-19 cases should be directed to that room at the time of symptom onset until appropriate isolation plans can be carried out.
- **Contact your local health department as required by OSHA.**
- Arrange for ill employees to be evaluated by a medical provider
- H-2A: Make sure every employee has enough food and water as they will be quarantined and unable to leave the farm
- H-2A Frequently check on the ill employee in isolation to monitor for worsening symptoms. About 20% of infected people will develop severe respiratory symptoms that may require hospitalization
- Instruct employees who have had close contact with a COVID-19 patient to self-monitor for symptoms of COVID-19 (fever, cough, or shortness of breath) for 14 days. Those exposed should be separated from non-exposed employees for 14 days (H-2A: e.g. sleep in a separate room, work in a separate area, use a separate bathroom and cooking facility). Employees can continue to work unless they have tested positive for COVID-19 or are exhibiting any symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath, etc.) according to the FDA – [see these guidelines](#). If they develop symptoms of COVID-19, they should immediately be quarantined and you should contact your local health department.

Additional steps such as deep cleaning of facilities or complete closure of the business are not mandatory, but can be taken if the business owner believes it is safer for all employees and customers.

- Failure to provide separate housing for infected H-2A visa holders could reasonably be expected to cause death or serious harm to the uninfected workers, which violates the Migrant Housing Act of North Carolina that requires housing providers to immediately provide safe housing.
- It is unlawful for employers and migrant housing providers to retaliate/take any adverse employment action against any worker who files a complaint or otherwise asserts their right to safe working and/or migrant housing conditions in NC under the NC Retaliation Employment Discrimination Act.

Please find all information [here](#).

Useful Resources:

- Please find [here guidelines](#) on personal protective equipment on NC farms
- NC Department of Labor: [Temporary Worker Housing COVID-19 Guidance](#)
- N.C. Cooperative Extension Fact Sheet: FAQ: [COVID-19 and small produce farms](#)
- [COVID-19 Resources for fresh fruit and vegetable producers.](#)
- [Webinar: Cleaning, Sanitizing and Disinfecting](#)
- Fresh [produce should be washed before consumption](#): Social Media Image
- [Food Safety on a U-Pick Operation](#): Print out for the Farm.

For employees (according to [NCDA&CS guidelines](#))

- Take your temperature every day before work
- Wear [a face mask at all times when working](#)
- Practice social distancing if possible
- Don't come to work if you feel sick
- Don't share objects (like headsets) that are used near the face
- Don't congregate in groups – try to maintain 6 feet of distance from others
- H-2A: No infected or exposed employee should be allowed or forced to return to their home-country prior to being cleared by the health department for travel. This would present a public health risk and could be subject to prosecution pursuant to North Carolina's laws governing communicable disease control (G.S. 130A-25).
- If employees would like to make a CONFIDENTIAL complaint about unsafe working or migrant labor camp living conditions in English or Spanish, **they can contact the NC Department of Labor at 1- 800-NC-LABOR.**

Useful Resources:

- [Bandanas as Face Covers](#)
- [CDC Guidelines for Workers](#)

For consumers (according to [NC State Food Safety Resources](#))

According to the [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#), COVID-19 is **not a food-borne disease**, and spreads mainly from person to person via droplets and aerosols. There is currently no evidence that the virus is transmitted through fresh produce.

Eating [fresh produce is not harmful](#), as Dr. Ben Chapman explains in [this video](#). Even if an employee has tested positive for COVID-19, as long as the business and the consumer practices recommended distancing, hygiene and protection measures, it is [absolutely safe to buy and consume fresh produce and bottled and processed products on a farm](#), in a grocery store or elsewhere.

- Fresh [produce should be washed before consumption](#).
- [Food Safety on a U-Pick Operation](#)