

News Article

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Food and Agriculture is Critical Infrastructure – What Does This Mean?

The advent of novel Coronavirus Disease – 2019, or COVID-19, has caused major disruptions in many aspects of society. Amidst all of this, you may have become aware of such terms as “critical infrastructure” and “essential businesses.”

The United States Department of Homeland Security (USDHS) has identified 16 sectors of the country as Critical Infrastructure. According to the USDHS Critical Infrastructure Security website (<https://www.dhs.gov/topic/critical-infrastructure-security#>): “Critical infrastructure describes the physical and cyber systems and assets that are so vital to the United States that their incapacity or destruction would have a debilitating impact on our physical or economic security or public health or safety. The nation's critical infrastructure provides the essential services that underpin American society.”

One area in which operations are protected under those current federal guidelines is agriculture and farming. Businesses involved in food and agriculture, including farming, are not just permitted to continue operating but, according to USDHS, “have a special responsibility in these times to continue operations.”

This means that, at the state level, farmers and other agriculture producers are permitted to travel for performance of work-related duties as clarified by Governor Holcomb's recent Stay at Home Executive Order 20-08. Section 14.c of that Executive Order specifically lists Food, Beverage and Agriculture under Essential Businesses and Operations. This applies to those in food production, including field crops, as well as forestry and wood products. Guidance has also been issued indicating the inclusion of ornamental, lawn and landscape production, sales and services.

USDHS also has specific provisions related to employees and workers in sectors designated as Critical Infrastructure. According to the USDHS Guidance on Critical Infrastructure Workforce (<https://www.cisa.gov/critical-infrastructure-sectors>): “Promoting the ability of such workers to continue to work during periods of community restriction, access management, social distancing, or closure orders/directives is crucial to community resilience and continuity of essential functions.”

It is recommended that agricultural workers carry documentation indicating their agricultural profession in case they are questioned by law enforcement or other authorities. Samples of such documentation are available online. One example may be found at: <https://extension.purdue.edu/Whitley/article/36703>.

Does this mean that farmers and others involved in agriculture will not be affected by COVID-19? Absolutely not. Certain business practices will need to change to ensure the health and safety of all

involved. The shipment of products or performance of services will be altered to reduce the possibility of COVID-19 transmission. Creative management of supply chains, grain delivery and other aspects of farming will be required. However, farmers should be able to continue farming and agribusinesses should be able to continue doing business.

Everyone, including farmers, should be aware of all health and safety recommendations related to COVID-19. Some relevant online resources include:

CDC Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers to Plan and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html>

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) instructions for employers on how to prepare for COVID-19: <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf>

At the federal level, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are maintaining resources and updates at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>. Statewide updates can be found through the Indiana State Department of Health at: <https://coronavirus.in.gov/>

Purdue Extension is also compiling COVID-19 information and resources across all of its program areas at the following link: <https://extension.purdue.edu/label/44>

This is an unexpected and often stressful situation. Conditions are fluid and rapidly changing. Fortunately, farmers are resilient and accustomed to adapting to change with little or no notice. This is one more situation that requires adjustment and adaptation. Increased planning for various aspects of farming — particularly regarding on-farm health and safety and supply chain logistics — will be needed. However, farming will continue, as will agriculture and all aspects of the nation's food supply, given the designation by the federal government and Governor Holcomb that these are essential businesses and services that must continue.

Plan for this. Adjust your operation as seems necessary and prudent. Be sure to communicate regularly with your employees, family members and other businesses with which you work. Maintain records so you can verify the impact of COVID-19 on your operations if assistance later becomes available. And, of course, hope for some dryer weather before long. Above all, please be safe.

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