COVID-19 and Its Impact on Production Agriculture

Bill Field, Professor1

Purdue University’s Agricultural Safety and Health Program

 Less than two percent of the U.S. population is directly engaged in agricultural production. Never in history have so few people been responsible for feeding, fueling, and clothing so many. As COVID-19 makes its way into rural communities, its potential impact on farm and ranch operations remains largely unknown. Currently, the COVID-19 issue is being given much attention by the general media, but largely on its impact on urban populations. As viewed by much of the press, the critical threats currently appear to be the empty shelves in the bread, milk, egg, oatmeal, and toilet paper aisles. There has been little discussion, as of yet, on how the virus might impact agricultural producers who are responsible to supply the food for the grocery shelves, especially if the outbreak continues into the upcoming growing season.

 Based upon the track record of this specific outbreak and historical evidence from other virus-based pandemics, those engaged in agricultural production and their operations, if exposed, could be at a higher risk than their urban neighbors. In fact, the consequences could be much more significant than those associated with the closing of retail shops, restaurants, churches, and coffee shops. The warnings, however, may be less visible because of adequate food supplies, lower rural population density, less available health care and testing, and less reliable reporting on the actual number of cases in rural communities.

 Other factors that could contribute to increased vulnerability of the agricultural community include these:

1. The average age of farmers and ranchers in the U.S., according to USDA, is approximately 58, with many producers in their 60s and 70s. This form of COVID-19 appears, thus far, to be especially hard on those over 60 years of age, especially for those with pre-existing or compromised medical conditions.
2. An estimated 15-20 percent of the farm/ranch population is already dealing with physical limitations or disabilities that increase their vulnerability to the virus and greater risk of experiencing medical complications. These physical conditions are often age-related. According to the USDA-supported National AgrAbility Project, the farm and ranch population has a higher prevalence of diagnosed arthritis and joint inflammation, heart disease, high blood pressure, and respiratory impairments. There are few other essential U.S. industries that are so dependent upon such a large population of older, medically at-risk workers.
3. If the virus continues to spread, there is little redundancy, or back-up, for the current highly skilled labor force required to sustain a high-tech agricultural workplace. When key personnel become unable to work due to illness or are being quarantined due to testing positive for the virus, there is no ready pool of trained replacements to bring in to perform essential production tasks. Contrary to what some political leaders have suggested, not everyone has the skill set required to milk cows twice a day, provide healthcare to a flock of turkeys or chickens, assist in difficult deliveries of newborn calves, or operate and service the specialized equipment used on today’s farms. This type of worker takes weeks and even months of training, even if individuals could be found who would be willing to do this type of work.

In some cases, agricultural employers rely on seasonal or temporary workers from outside the U.S. to perform certain labor-intensive tasks such as milking or vegetable production. If access into the U.S. becomes more restrictive due to the virus, this labor pool will also quickly dry up.

1. Agriculture involves the production and processing of a wide variety of perishable commodities that simply cannot wait for the pandemic to run its course, or for the end of a lengthy quarantine, or for businesses to re-open. Cows still need to be milked at least twice a day or they will physically suffer. Eggs need to be collected, washed, and refrigerated, or they will spoil. The production of maple syrup cannot be delayed until July. Newborn calves and baby pigs need to be cared for and vaccinated or they may not survive. Beef cattle need to be fed. Grain contracts need to be fulfilled or significant penalties will be imposed. Soon, crops will need to be planted or there will not be a harvest next fall. In 2019, millions of acres went unplanted due to a cold, wet spring. In 2020, this scene may be repeated, but for a completely different reason – the lack of healthy workers due to the virus or efforts to contain it.
2. The physical isolation of many farms and ranches, and lack of adequate Internet service, could contribute to significant delays in receiving adequate healthcare information, disease diagnosis, and treatment for those who come down with the virus. On the other hand, this natural “social distancing” may slow the spread of the virus, but it may also delay needed assistance to care for livestock and perform other essential tasks when workers do become ill. It’s likely that some producers will become ill and no one outside the immediate family will even be aware of it, preventing a timely response to provide assistance.

Farmers and ranchers have a long history of responding to individual and community needs without being prodded or directed by a government agency. Whether it’s cleaning up after a tornado or flood, or coming together to plant or harvest crops for a neighbor who is sick or injured, the concept of “mutual aid” is still alive and well in most rural communities. There is no question that this attribute of being a good neighbor will continue during this current COVID-19 health crisis. For some, this will be demonstrated by being less concerned about their own well-being and comfort, and giving aid to those next-door who do have a need.

1. There has also been limited attention given to the similarities between the supplies needed to fight the spread of COVID-19 and those needed to provide regular care for livestock. During daily chores, many livestock producers rely on respiratory protection, rubber gloves, hand sanitizer, disinfectants such as bleach, Tyvek suits, and paper towels. These and other supplies have become less available and more expensive, in some cases due to hoarding. Without access to these supplies, the risk of an outbreak of a livestock related disease and disease transmission increases. This is an area where sharing of resources between producers could help meet this temporary shortage.

As the nation possibly takes increasingly drastic measures to contain COVID-19 and treat those who have it, the impact on agricultural producers and their ability to ensure the continuation of a safe food supply needs to be taken into consideration. Agricultural producers must be represented at the table to ensure that the implications of the decisions being made, especially for agriculture, are considered and the potential contributions and needs of producers are not overlooked.