Responding to COVID-19 in the Agricultural Community

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The signals appear clear: production agriculture will not likely escape the effects of COVID-19 as it spreads rapidly across the United States. Even though farms and ranches are scattered widely across generally isolated areas, given enough time, the virus will eventually catch up with some farm and ranch families. In most cases, the virus will be little more than an inconvenience with minor symptoms, while for some, it will take them out of commission for a week or more.

With sound justification, the bulk of the media and public health response has focused on heavily populated locations where there has been an abundance of diagnosed cases. There are, however, unique characteristics associated with agricultural producers and the agricultural workforce that could make them more vulnerable than other groups. These factors include; the higher average age of producers, a large proportion of this population having pre-existing health conditions or compromised immune systems, and a lack of access to appropriate healthcare and preventative healthcare information. According to the USDA’s National AgrAbility Project, other specific conditions that may put some farmers and ranchers at a more significant risk of infection include arthritis or join inflammations, heart disease, and respiratory impairments.

Agricultural producers, their families, and their employees should not see themselves as “bystanders” during this historic pandemic. Consideration needs to be given to how this disease could impact their lives and their operation, both now and into the upcoming growing season.

One approach is to consider employing well-tested principles from the field of emergency management to enhance the resiliency of production sites. These principles are often summarized under five headings: PREVENTION, PREPARATION, MITIGATION, RESPONSE, and RECOVERY. Each of these components has been demonstrated to have direct application to agricultural production sites as described below.

1. PREVENTION: The best return on any investment in emergency management is always prevention, when at all possible. For example, it’s a lot harder to clean up manure than it is to spread it. There are practical, low-cost measures that can be taken to reduce the risk or likelihood of COVID-19 impacting an agricultural production site. For example, one practice that is very effective, but often taken too lightly, is frequent handwashing.

Prevention steps should include implementing the highest level of biosecurity feasible, especially if livestock are involved. Stop all human traffic to the site that is not absolutely essential. This includes tour groups, reporters and politicians looking for photo opportunities, unsolicited sales calls, visits by outside family and friends, pizza delivery, and the UPS driver that may have just left five other farms delivering toilet paper and video games. Signage should be posted at all access points that stops visitors and lets them know that the facility is bio-secure and should not be entered. Providing a phone number on the sign for how someone can be contacted is also appropriate.

Check all arriving employees at the beginning of the day to make sure they show no signs of illness. Some employers are using low-cost electronic temperature monitors to identify employees who have an elevated temperature. Workers showing any symptoms, whether they admit to them or not, should be sent home, thereby reducing the risk to other workers present. Workers should not be penalized for self-reporting an illness. Implementing other public health measures, such as social or “work” distancing should be considered regardless of how “uncool” these policies might appear to employees. Employers should divide employees up into smaller teams to reduce exposure. Temporary polices could be implemented to have employees arrive and eat at different times, gather in smaller groups, avoid carpooling, and require them to report any travel plans where they might be exposed to high-risk individuals. Remember, communicate to employees that these measures are temporary and are being implemented to protect everyone, not to punish any individual who might become ill.

1. PREPAREDNESS: The key to being prepared for a crisis or emergency is to have a plan. It could be as simple as where to meet in the case of a fire, or to immediately call 911 in the event of a serious injury. Every agricultural production site, regardless of how small, should consider developing an emergency management or action plan. The plan should be written down, communicated to everyone involved, and address the most likely types of emergencies that might occur. Most plans address tornados, floods, fires, injuries, and violence in the workplace. Few, however, have a plan for dealing with COVID-19 or any other disease outbreak. This current outbreak, and its consequences, will certainly change the lack of attention being given to this topic in the future.

The plan should include specific measures that will be taken in each circumstance, such as how to respond to a serious injury, what to do in case of entrapment in a grain bin, or who will respond if the power to the ventilation system of a livestock building is lost. In the case of COVID-19 or other disease outbreaks, having a plan for completing essential chores when workers become ill, utilizing personal protective equipment, and quarantining the site, if necessary, should be addressed.

Special attention should also be given to tasks that are “person specific” or that have been in the past the responsibility of just one person. This might include, the mixing of feed, providing healthcare to livestock, or operating equipment that requires a “special touch” or has multiple steps to function properly. For example, a dairy operation with a breeding bull may only have one person who is capable of handling the bull safely. In other words, if a key family member or employee is unable to come to work due to illness, how will his or her job get done, if absolutely essential? It may be appropriate to document how specific or complex tasks are accomplished step-by-step. This would allow another person to step in and complete the tasks more safely and with fewer errors.

Preparedness also includes thinking through the need for supplies and equipment that could be needed during an emergency. This includes a portable generator to keep milking equipment running or to keep confined livestock buildings adequately ventilated. With respect to a disease outbreak such a COVID-19, it means having signage for facility access points, an adequate supply of respiratory protection, disinfectant, hand sanitizers, and first-aid supplies, and a means of communicating without having to come onsite.

1. MITIGATION: An emergency action plan for an agricultural production site should include strategies for how to minimize or mitigate the potential losses from an emergency or crisis. For example, a farmer mitigates his potential losses by placing his fuel storage tanks away from buildings or by diking his chemical storage tanks. Having adequate insurance to cover specific types of property losses is simply good management.

In the case of COVID-19, this is new territory, and may require outside the box thinking. The plan could include a list of individuals who might be called upon to provide temporary labor or mutual aid if key workers become ill. It might include having alternative markets for fresh produce and means of getting it there in order to minimize the loss of perishable items. Implementing a policy of self-quarantine when anyone is diagnosed as ill is another form of mitigation by reducing the risk of further spread of the virus. Having adequate healthcare insurance for employees is also a form of mitigation.

1. RESPONSE: How a business of any size immediately responds to an emergency or crisis is extremely important to avoid or mitigate additional complications, such as civil liability. Ignoring a serious injury or illness in the workplace can also result in legal consequences. The strategies for how an agricultural producer will respond to an outbreak of COVID-19, should be part of the current management discussion and become part of the operation.

The first priority should be the well-being of everyone involved, both family and employees. Every effort should be made to reduce the risk of exposure. If an individual at the site becomes ill, they should be directed immediately to seek medical attention and sent home. If there is any evidence that the illness is life-threatening, 911 should be called immediately. Follow-up contact by phone should be used to check on their well-being and to make sure that they have received appropriate medical attention. If the illness was severe, employees should not be allowed to return to work until he or she has been released by a physician.

If a worker has tested positive for a contagious disease, the work area, especially the eating areas and bathrooms should be sanitized according to CDC guidelines. Questions from the media should be handled by only one spokesperson rather than from multiple individuals. If someone at the site tests positive for the COVID-19, the information should be channeled through management rather than multiple employees who may not understand the legal rights of privacy that a worker has regarding his or her medical condition.

1. RECOVERY: History has shown that how a business responds to a crisis has an impact on whether or not the business recovers and survives. In some cases, the financial losses are so great that the options are limited, and as a result, many businesses fail that experience catastrophic losses such as fires, tornadoes, and floods.

If the COVID-19 strikes an agricultural operation, the owners or managers need to recognize that the operation is not “you.” Everyone involved including family members and employees, needs to recognize that the most precious asset of any business is the people involved.

In order to survive, attention has to be focused on the important things, and those in charge need to have the humility to ask for help. COVID-19, regardless of how widespread its impact, will soon become a paragraph in our history books. This experience should be used to help develop more effective response strategies that will enhance agriculture’s capacity to address the next crisis.