**It’s Time to Plant – With or Without COVID-19**

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IN-PREPared (S.G. Ehlers, Ph.D., & E.J. Sheldon, M.S.)

One of the early Church fathers was working in his garden when a passerby stopped and asked him what he would do if he was informed that the following day would be his last day on earth. Without missing a stroke of his hoe he responded, “I would finish weeding my garden.” I asked one of my neighbors, while still maintaining appropriate social distancing, a somewhat similar question relating to the impact of COVID-19. He responded that he was, quite frankly, too busy taking care of a crop of new calves and getting equipment ready for spring planting to give COVID-19 a lot of thought. These two tillers of the soil, living 1500 years apart, appeared to have their priorities in the right place. Neither was going to be distracted from what they saw as essential tasks needing immediate attention and allow their lives to become captive to the daily cycle of “late breaking news” and the fear it is currently generating.

Unlike basketball, baseball, and school, spring planting can’t be cancelled or postponed to a more convenient time with fewer risks. Unlike restaurants, churches, and bars, agribusinesses cannot be closed until everyone tests negative for COVID-19. Unlike local, state, and federal government offices, grain terminals can’t stop receiving customers to keep all the employees feeling safe and happy. If we are all going to eat next year, fields need to be tilled, fertilized, planted, and cared for or the consequences from the “cure” for this disease will, in fact, far outweigh the immediate health effects.

Just as the President will need a strategy for getting the country back to work, every farm family and operation will need a strategy to weave their way through this upcoming planting season despite the rippling effects of COVID-19. Even though agricultural production is considered in the National Emergency Response Plan as an essential service, farm families are already facing issues that are making their jobs more difficult and, in some cases, more risky. For example:

* One farmer reported that the front door of his local implement dealership was locked with a sign requesting customers to order and pay online for parts. The parts would then be left outside the front door for pick-up. For some producers, this is problematic because they have limited access to online services. For others, working through the need for a particular part or repair requires the technical assistance of a skilled parts person who has immediate access to recall notices, part number changes, and service bulletins.
* Reluctance by some agribusinesses to perform onsite service and technical calls to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19. A farmer with a tractor needing technical support was told to leave his tractor outside the shop door and not have anyone present during the technician’s service call. This may encourage social distancing, but sure makes troubleshooting difficult without the regular operator present.
* Farmers are having difficulty obtaining the needed personal protective equipment to safely carry out spring tasks. This includes N-95 respirators for dust protection, chemical-type goggles for anhydrous ammonia and pesticide application, face shields, rubber gloves, and Tyvek suits. On the labels of agricultural chemicals, specific types of personal protective equipment are clearly identified as required. Failure to use this equipment can increase the risk of chemical exposure and, in the case of anhydrous ammonia, the potential for serious eye and skin injury or worse.
* Many farmers rely on part-time labor during the planting season in order to take advantage of the very narrow planting window. Experienced and reliable farm labor is already in short supply and often older, retired farmers or family members are tapped to operate equipment, drive escort vehicles, and run for parts. This age group, however, is the most vulnerable to the serious health effects of COVID-19 and may wish to sit out this planting season. (When you see the reports that the majority of deaths from COVID-19 are people over the age of 65, can anyone blame them for exercising more caution?) This may result in the primary farm operators and their families working longer hours with fewer breaks, potentially increasing the risk of fatigue-related incidents. For example, not having extra drivers to provide escort service when transporting over width farm equipment on the highway could increase the risk of collisions with other motor vehicles, especially at night.
* Farm families with small children may find themselves suddenly without usual childcare services. Parents may be tempted to take younger children along with them in the truck or tractor as a means of providing “temporary” childcare. History has shown that small children and a busy planting season, along with distracted adults, are not a good mix. The risk of injury per hour of exposure for these children becomes unacceptably high. In 2018, three children under the age of five were run over and killed in Indiana farm yards.

There are no simple solutions to some of these issues and, in some cases, they are a re-occurring problem that has been exasperated by the current circumstances. Doing nothing, however, is never a good solution, and, in most cases, farmers will proceed utilizing the resources available to them. Maybe, those of us who eat need to respond as we have with the courageous healthcare workers fighting COVID-19 - by sharing a little grace and encouragement to our farmers. This might include:

* Buying direct from local farmers who have freezer beef, eggs, and produce available.
* Offering to provide volunteer escort service to farmers when moving equipment on roadways. A following vehicle with bright flashers can help warn motorists and prevent rear-end collisions with slower moving farm equipment.
* Offering to assist a farmer by picking up parts or other inputs, necessary to keep their operation moving forward.
* Showing a little more patience when you get behind a slow-moving piece of farm equipment and consider, as you are waiting to get by, where your food comes from.
* If you have some unused N-95 respirators, rubber gloves, or chemical-type goggles in your possession, give them to a local farmer as an early “Christmas” present.
* Offer to provide childcare for a young farm couple to allow them to focus on getting their crops planted.
* Cook a meal or pick-up some carryout meals to support a local restaurant and deliver them to a farmer over the next few weeks.

Remember, none of those activities are long-term commitments, but rather a means of showing farmers that what they do is critical to all of us. Who knows, you might develop some long-lasting relationships with your neighbors.