
Farm Employee Management: Five Steps to Formulate Workforce Contingency Plans

When the coronavirus spread to rural America, farms as well as other agricultural and rural employers saw the need to establish labor supply contingency plans.

Rural businesses across the country have a wide range of labor needs. Such businesses may include farms, ag product and service providers, and other rural retail businesses. On many farms, all labor is performed by family members, while others have limited non-family employees, perhaps on a seasonal basis during planting and harvest operations. Livestock farm operations - including dairy, beef, swine, goats, sheep, poultry or other specialty livestock - tend to have more significant year-round labor requirements. Animals must be fed, watered, and otherwise cared-for whether or not those responsible for these duties become sick or must be quarantined. As a best practice, all farms and rural businesses should formulate labor contingency plans and review plans at least annually.

STEP ONE: Protect the current workforce

Helpful resources exist with recommendations on employee protection to limit the spread of illness in the workplace. Key advice includes:

- 1. Social distancing:** Prevent spread by maintaining distance between and among workers whenever possible. The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides information on [social distancing and how it works](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html), www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html.
- 2. Handwashing, sanitizers and sanitation:** More than ever, biosecurity on the farm is of the utmost importance. Direct workers to wash hands frequently with soap and hot water, especially after touching high contact surfaces where viruses

may live for extended hours or days. The CDC provides resources, instructions and videos on [correct handwashing procedures](http://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/index.html), www.cdc.gov/handwashing/index.html. Provide hand sanitizers for use when hand washing is not immediately available. Regularly sanitize surfaces that are touched by others. The CDC provides a fact sheet on handwashing and hand sanitizer, describing proper use of each.

- 3. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):** To the extent possible, provide appropriate PPEs which may include masks, disposable gloves, or face shields. Garments may be appropriate in some environments.
- 4. Direct sick employees to stay home:** Educate current employees that if they have symptoms (such as fever, cough, or shortness of breath) they should notify a supervisor and stay home. The [CDC provides guidelines](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/index.html), www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/index.html, for sick employees who should not return to work until they have met appropriate criteria in consultation with healthcare providers. Similarly, workers who feel well but have a sick household member with COVID-19 should notify their supervisor.
- 5. Encourage vaccines:** The CDC recommends everyone aged five years and older should get one dose of an [updated COVID-19 vaccine](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/stay-up-to-date.html), www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/stay-up-to-date.html, as well as seasonal flu vaccines that are available. Specific age groups or those who are moderately or severely immunocompromised will have additional recommendations. Consider covering the time and cost for vaccinations of employees if health insurance coverage does not.

STEP TWO: Prepare the current workforce - cross-training and SOPs

Cross-training and job rotation is always a good policy under what may now be described as “normal” conditions. This strategy applies even where the entire workforce is family-based – and in fact, may be even more essential in that situation. With multiple factors that may impact daily farm operations, it is vital that workers are cross-trained and comprehend the essential duties of all positions on the farm.

An integral part of cross-training is the existence of well-written and accessible standard operating procedure documents (SOPs) which provide straightforward, step-by-step descriptions of necessary tasks, including supplies and tools required. We can learn from many dairy operations which tend to have a history of maintaining SOPs as a beneficial tool on the farm. When writing or revising SOPs, assume that an individual who is entirely unfamiliar with these tasks may need to read and follow the guidelines, and use language that is easy to understand – leave the technical jargon for another time. These written SOPs should be easily available to anyone who may possibly need the documents for guidance. Physically post this essential information in key locations around the farm or ag business. Maintain reference materials in well-marked three-ring binders. While SOPs may be stored on electronic media, they are most accessible in printed formats.

Consider supplementing written SOPs with video tools. With easy access to technology, even the amateur can capture video of everyday jobs on the farm which illustrate how the tasks should be completed. Short videos can be helpful to demonstrate and explain the steps, and clarify questions which may arise from a written SOP. By way of illustration, see a [short video on formulation of SOPs on the farm](https://youtu.be/24QxF0H3l-s), <https://youtu.be/24QxF0H3l-s>. These videos can be uploaded to an online site, or stored on a portable storage device (flash drive) accessible to all who may need them.

STEP THREE: Design or update the workforce contingency plans

Whatever the regular workforce consists of on the farm, now is the time to assume that Plan A may collapse in the event of an unexpected event. Devise Plan B as the back-up plan to fill labor needs; and be ready with a Plan C on deck as well. Note that many dairy operations already have a labor contingency plan - and such plans are models for other farms and ag businesses. Dairy producers know that the herd must be milked regularly, and these producers anticipate situations which may impact the availability of the workforce. Most dairies have fill-in workers who provide substitute labor on weekends or an as-needed basis, so those workers are already trained. All farms (livestock, crop, specialty) and other agricultural businesses should have similar plans. Plans already in existence should be reviewed and updated. On occasion, bring in the substitute workers for skill refreshment, and to make those individuals aware that they are a vital part of the organization’s contingency labor plan. Review and communicate the plans for contacting workers who need to come in to relieve and substitute for the regular workforce.

STEP FOUR: Recruit and train new contingency workers

Agricultural employers have long faced a worker shortage, consistently confronting a challenge to locate farm workers.

Guidance for applicant recruitment is found in the Ag Decision Maker article, [Get the Right Start in Hiring Employees](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/wholefarm/html/c1-70.html) (AgDM File C1-70, www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/wholefarm/html/c1-70.html). Remember, the best source for finding new employees is current employees. Current, successful employees know the work environment and the type of skills necessary. Therefore, they are apt to refer and recommend persons who they believe would likewise succeed in a similar position. Current employees have personal knowledge of individuals available for employment due to recent changes in their circumstances. Social media tools

and networking may aid in identifying available workers. Depending on the needs of the farm or other ag business, local online job boards and state employment sites should be utilized to post employer needs. Iowa Workforce Development can be found at <https://www.iowaworks.gov/vosnet/default.aspx>.

STEP FIVE: Prepare to function with a reduced workforce

Be ready for the possibility that the farm or ag business may be unable to recruit and train replacement workers. Anticipate this scenario by prioritizing the most essential tasks and critical workers. Determine which tasks have the highest priority for maintaining the current schedule and frequency. Identify other tasks that could be considered for a reduced schedule. Formulate guidance for the situation where an owner, manager or other key leader becomes ill or needs to self-quarantine. Prepare mid-level workers to assume temporary management responsibilities, and identify tools that may be used for remote communication. Guidelines should be written, widely-shared and posted in key locations.

RESOURCES

[ISU Center for Agricultural Law and Taxation \(CALT\) - COVID-19 Resources](http://www.calt.iastate.edu/covid-19-resources), www.calt.iastate.edu/covid-19-resources

[Frequently-Asked Questions for Iowa Employers and Employees](http://workforce.iowa.gov/labor-market-information/resources/faq) - workforce.iowa.gov/labor-market-information/resources/faq

National Milk Producers Federation - [Recommended Protocols for Dairy Farms When an Employee Tests Positive for COVID-19](http://www.nmpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FINAL-Recommended-Protocols-for-Dairy-Farms-When-an-Employee-Tests-Positive-for-COVID.pdf), www.nmpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FINAL-Recommended-Protocols-for-Dairy-Farms-When-an-Employee-Tests-Positive-for-COVID.pdf

Penn State Extension - [Standard Operating Procedures - A Writing Guide](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/dairyteam/files/documents/SOPswritingguide.pdf), www.extension.iastate.edu/dairyteam/files/documents/SOPswritingguide.pdf

UMass Amherst Extension - [Standard Operating Procedures - how to write them on the farm](https://youtu.be/24QxF0H3l-s), <https://youtu.be/24QxF0H3l-s>, a short video on how to write SOPs on the farm,

Ohio State University - [Questions for Farms with Employees](http://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/u.osu.edu/dist/9/63643/files/2020/03/COVID-19_Handout_ENGLISH.pdf), cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/u.osu.edu/dist/9/63643/files/2020/03/COVID-19_Handout_ENGLISH.pdf

Farm Employee Management Series

The complete [Farm Employee Management Series](https://go.iastate.edu/AGDMEMPLOYEEEMGMT) can be found on the Ag Decision Maker website, <https://go.iastate.edu/AGDMEMPLOYEEEMGMT>.

C1-70 Get the Right Start in Hiring Employees

C1-71 The Job Interview, and What Questions Can I Ask?

C1-72 Do We Need an Employee Handbook?

C1-73 Assembly of Farm Job Descriptions

C1-74 Put Job Descriptions to Work on Your Farm

C1-75 Evaluation and Selection of Job Candidates

C1-76 Getting the New Employee Off to a Good Start on Day One

C1-77 Employment Eligibility Verification–The Basics of Form I-9 Compliance

C1-78 New Employee Orientation

C1-79 Farm Safety and Hiring Youth on the Farm

C1-80 Applicant Background Checks

C1-81 Terminating Employees in Iowa

C1-82 Health, Stress, and Well-Being

C1-83 Avoid Employment Pitfalls

C1-84 Five Steps to Formulate Workforce Contingency Plans

C1-85 Protect Farm Workers from Heat-Related Stress and Illness

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