
Five Steps to Formulate Workforce Contingency Plans in the COVID-19 Setting

As the coronavirus spreads to rural America, farms as well as other agricultural and rural employers must 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. All farms and rural businesses must formulate or review labor contingency plans.

STEP ONE: Protect the current workforce

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

(1) Social distancing: Prevent coronavirus spread by maintaining a minimum six-foot distance between and among workers whenever possible. Direct workers to maintain social distancing when away from the farm by avoiding contact with others beyond their immediate household. The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides information on [social distancing and how it works](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html), www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html.

(2) Handwashing, sanitizers and sanitation: Now 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 the virus may live for extended hours or days. The CDC provides resources, instructions and videos on [correct handwashing procedures](https://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](https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/pdf/hand-sanitizer-factsheet.pdf), describing proper use of each, www.cdc.gov/handwashing/pdf/hand-sanitizer-factsheet.pdf.

(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. The CDC now encourages the use of [cloth masks](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html), and provides instructions on how to make and use such masks, www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html.

(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](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/steps-when-sick.html) for sick employees who should not return to work until they have met appropriate criteria in consultation with healthcare providers, www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/steps-when-sick.html. Similarly, workers who feel well but have a sick household member with COVID-19 should notify their supervisor.

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. As COVID-19 moves into rural America, 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. In these days of 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 COVID-19 impacts. 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 in the COVID-19 environment. Plans already in existence should be reviewed and updated. Now is the time to bring in the substitute workers for skill refreshment, and to make those individuals aware that they are 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. In the COVID-19 environment, farms and rural businesses may have access to labor that is not usually available. College and high school students are likely at home due to the pandemic, and available for part-time or occasional employment. As summer approaches, some of these same students may be unable to access traditional summer employment opportunities, and could be available for work on the farm. Many individuals across the country have been laid off from their usual occupations and are now available for employment in the ag sector.

Guidance for applicant recruitment is found in the Ag Decision Maker article, [Get the Right Start in Hiring Employees](#) (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 www.IowaWorks.gov.

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 Extension and Outreach AgDM Farm Employment Resources](#), www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/wdhumanresources.html

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

[Iowa Workforce Development](#), www.IowaWorks.gov

[Frequently-Asked Questions for Iowa Employers and Employees](#), www.iowaworkforcedevelopment.gov/COVID-19

[Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers to Plan and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#), www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fspecific-groups%2Fguidance-business-response.html

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

[Standard Operating Procedures—A Writing Guide \(Penn State Extension\)](#), www.extension.iastate.edu/dairyteam/files/page/files/SOPswritingguide.pdf

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

[Ohio State University – Questions for Farms with Employees, English](#): https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/u.osu.edu/dist/9/63643/files/2020/03/COVID-19_Handout_ENGLISH.pdf, or [Spanish](#): https://muskingum.osu.edu/sites/muskingum/files/imce/Program_Pages/ANR/COVID-19%20Handout_SPANISH.pdf

This institution is an equal opportunity provider. For the full non-discrimination statement or accommodation inquiries, go to www.extension.iastate.edu/diversity/ext.

Prepared by Melissa O'Rourke,
Farm & Agribusiness Management Specialist
morourke@iastate.edu

www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm
