



Guide to Operating your Essential Farm Business during COVID-19

There are many ways to manage risk and improve the safety and wellbeing of your farm business workplace, while doing your part to reduce the risk to public health and supply chain disruptions.

This Guide for farms and farm businesses is split into three parts: Facilitating Business Interactions on the Farm, Preventing and Responding to COVID-19 Exposure, and Managing Risk During Business Operations. OFA recognizes that these new protocols and procedures can be overwhelming. Please review the document as needed and implement these procedures based on your farm and your situation.

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Disclaimer

The following information is for guidance only and should not be interpreted as medical or legal advice. As protocols may change rapidly and frequently, all farm businesses should regularly review information and procedures from their local public health unit, the Ontario Ministry of Health, and Health Canada, to remain up to date on current policies and protocols. This document was revised on March 26, 2021.

I. Facilitating Business Interactions on the Farm

As an essential workplace, farm businesses must facilitate business interactions such as: receiving farm input supplies, necessary veterinary care, equipment repairs by mechanics and other specialists, milk trucks, deliveries or shipments of livestock and poultry, and many more. The list below provides some considerations when coordinating these essential business activities.

i. Planning for Essential Visitors

- COVID-19 is thought to spread mainly through close contact from person-to-person in respiratory droplets from someone who is infected. All non-essential on-farm visits should be postponed.
- Farm entry should be limited to personnel performing essential activities (i.e. those required for the care and wellbeing your farm and farm animals, employees and facilities).
- Pre-authorized visitors to your farm (e.g. feed delivery, seed delivery, milk truck, veterinarian, farrier, etc.) should call ahead and schedule a meeting or drop-off time. Limit the number of visitors at any one time to reduce interactions.
- Designate and provide signage for a specified area where the interaction (e.g. drop off, pick-up, service) will take place.
- Limit face-to-face contact wherever possible. Always ensure a minimum distance of two metres between yourself and others. Avoid physical contact such as shaking hands or hugging.
- Limit signature requirements and utilize online and/or phone transactions wherever possible.
- People who are sick or have signs of illness (e.g. fever, coughing, sneezing, runny nose, tiredness, shortness of breath) should stay home and call a doctor or healthcare provider.

ii. Protocols During the Visit

- You may deny entry of any visitor to your farm if you suspect that you are at risk of contracting COVID-19.
- Upon entry on the farm, visitors should immediately wash their hands with soap for 20 seconds. You and your visitors should avoid touching your/their face, eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands or gloves.
- Disinfect incoming materials using cleaning and sanitization protocols. Handle the materials with disposable gloves, if available.
- While the risk of contracting COVID-19 from handling packages is believed to be low, materials received on the farm should be left untouched for as long as possible to lessen the viability of any virus that may be present on surfaces. This does not replace taking adequate safety precautions and practicing frequent hand hygiene by washing hands with soap or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Notify your suppliers if you, an employee or a family member:
 - Have travelled outside Canada within the previous 14 days
 - Are ill with flu-like symptoms
 - Have been in close contact with anyone who has tested positive for COVID-19.

If any of these conditions are present, these individuals must stay away from all drivers or suppliers. They must maintain self-isolation and avoid being present for loading or unloading.

iii. Availability of Washroom Facilities

- ❑ Visitors should avoid using the same washroom facilities as farm employees whenever possible.
- ❑ Make every reasonable effort to provide portable washroom facilities with handwashing and sanitation supplies for farm visitors.
- ❑ Ensure regular cleaning and disinfecting of washroom facilities, after each use if possible.
- ❑ If portable washrooms that include water for handwashing are not available for rent, running water could be provided by way of a large water jug which includes a spout or a pump, a soap dispenser and paper towels, in addition to the portable washroom.
- ❑ While there may be a shortage of hand sanitizer, make every reasonable effort to obtain a supply of hand sanitizer for the farm business. Visit the [Workplace PPE Supplier Directory](#) to review a list of companies that sell PPE.

II. Preventing and Responding to COVID-19 Exposure

i. Prevention

Under Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHS), it is your responsibility as an employer to take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker. All employers are strongly encouraged to create a COVID-19 workplace safety plan for their workplace. This guide will help you use the public health advice to develop and maintain your plan. It will help prepare you to put controls into place to make the workplace safer for everyone. Ontario has developed a number of resources to help you prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace and we encourage you to take advantage of them in developing your safety plan.

ii. Screening

Employers should implement active screening (such as asking questions) in addition to passive screening (such as signage) measures.

Passive screening

- Signage should:
 - be clear, visible and able to be read by all
 - warn individuals to not work if experiencing respiratory symptoms
 - encourage individuals to practice hand hygiene
 - encourage individuals to follow proper respiratory etiquette

Active screening

Implement active COVID-19 screening immediately for anyone entering the farm. For information on how to do this, read the [COVID-19 workplace safety plan guide section on screening and the screening tool for workplaces \(business and organizations\)](#).

Anyone showing or reporting [symptoms of COVID-19](#) should not be allowed to enter the farm and should be advised to go home immediately, self-isolate and notify the employer – farm and help agency if there is one.

Instruct workers to continue to [self-monitor for symptoms](#) such as fever, cough, or difficulty breathing.

All workers and employers can use the Ministry of Health's [online COVID-19 self-assessment tool](#) if they need help determining whether they should seek further care.

Additional information about screening can be found [here](#).

iii. Testing and Responding to COVID-19 Exposure

Testing

We need all Ontario agri-food businesses to take an active role in testing to prevent outbreaks and minimize the impact of COVID-19 on your business, your workers and our economy.

Anyone with at least one symptom of COVID-19 should be tested and should remain in self-isolation while test results are pending. Under the current provincial testing strategy, all symptomatic and some asymptomatic individuals are eligible for testing. Local public health units may, based on a risk assessment, provide further direction as to whether a worker does not require testing or may require further testing.

More information on testing can be found [here](#).

Exposure to COVID-19

If a family member, employee, or someone who has visited your farm recently, is sick, or tests positive for COVID-19, your business is required to follow public health measures put in place to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Public health authorities have communicated the following directions:

- Employees who have COVID-19 symptoms must advise their manager immediately, contact their local public health authority (Ontario 1-866-797-0000) and follow their recommendations, immediately isolate from others and be sent home, without using public transit, if possible.
- Employees who are at home and who may have COVID-19 are to follow the advice of their local public health authority regarding self-isolation to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

iv. How Cases are Managed

Case management decisions are made by the local public health unit, guided by the Ministry of Health's [Management of Cases and Contacts of COVID-19 in Ontario](#) and other relevant provincial guidance.

The following are general guidelines:

- All positive COVID-19 cases — whether asymptomatic or symptomatic — should be isolated immediately upon diagnosis.
- Similarly, any individual with symptoms of COVID-19 who is a close contact of a positive COVID-19 case should be tested and isolated.
- If there is a large number of cases, they can be cohorted (i.e., grouped together) in shared isolation space, but the cohort should be separated at all times from all others who are not confirmed cases of COVID-19.
- Positive cases should be reassessed immediately and regularly for new or worsening symptoms of COVID-19.
- Active cases (i.e., those that may still be infectious, during what is known as the period of communicability) should not work, regardless of symptoms, until they are resolved or cleared by the local public health unit or their health care provider.

It is important to determine if a case lives in a congregate setting associated with the farm or in a community setting as this impacts the management plan.

For additional details on how to manage active cases, view Ontario's [Working with farm operators to stop the spread of COVID-19 on farms](#) resource.

v. Implementing Self-Isolation

You are required to self-isolate and follow Ontario Ministry of Health (MOH) guidelines if:

- You have been exposed to, or suspect exposure to COVID-19;
- You are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19;
- You have travelled outside of Canada. Even if you are not experiencing symptoms, you must self-isolate for 14 days upon return, as per Ministry of Health guidelines.

Farmers and employees who are self-isolating cannot be present when industry personnel visit their farm. You are required to designate an alternate person who has not been exposed to you to be present, or you can be available by telephone to answer visitors' questions or concerns.

Farmers and employees who are self-isolating should not work, or be in their barns at any time, during the 14-day period.

For additional information on self-isolation, view Public Health Ontario's fact sheet on [How to Self-Isolate](#).

vi. Notification of COVID-19 Exposure

Your local public health unit will provide guidance on how to notify those you have come in contact with that they may have been exposed to COVID-19. You will need to remember anyone you have come into contact with, including at your farm business and at home. To stop the spread of COVID-19, it is important to be as accurate and thorough as possible.

Generally, if an employee contracts COVID-19 in the workplace as an occupational illness, you are required to report the illness to the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board within three days of receiving notification of the illness. More information as to how to report the illness is available on the [WSIB Covid-19 Update page](#).

Additionally, if you are advised that a worker (current or former) has an occupational illness, or that a claim for an occupational illness has been filed with the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, you must give notice, in writing, within four days to:

1. a director of the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development. This can be achieved by sending an email to MLTSDocIllness.notices@ontario.ca.
2. your joint health and safety committee or health and safety representative, and
3. the trade union (if applicable)

[Learn more about the requirements for notification to the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development.](#)

Employer Checklist

- Ensure your employees are aware of their responsibility to properly notify you if they are feeling unwell, or of any risk of exposure to COVID-19 they may have encountered.
- Communicate clearly with your employees about your sick leave policy. If you do not have one, templates are available in the [Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council AgriHR Toolkit](#).
- Ensure that employees with symptoms of, or exposure to, COVID-19 feel supported by your farm business if they decide to self-isolate.
- Do not** provide information regarding the name, date of birth, or other identifiers of any employees diagnosed with COVID-19. Your employees are entitled to privacy under Canadian privacy legislation. There are special circumstances when you may have to have to share this information (e.g. life-threatening reasons). Consult with legal counsel before sharing any personal medical information of your employees.
- Do** provide information to your employees if they have been exposed to COVID-19 in the workplace. If known, provide:
 - date(s) of their potential exposure; and
 - the extent and circumstances of their potential exposure (e.g. incident indirect contact versus prolonged direct contact).
- Continue to monitor and follow recommendations provided by public health agencies.

vii. Returning to Work

Resolved confirmed cases (as determined by the local public health unit or health care provider) can return to work and no longer need to self-isolate.

Typically, an individual will be declared resolved:

- 14 days after the onset of symptoms if symptoms are improving for 72 hours and there is no fever, or
- 14 days after the positive laboratory test sample collection date, assuming the individual remains without a fever and has improvement of symptoms.

viii. Managing Exposure to Livestock and Other Farmed Animals

Some animals are capable of contracting and spreading COVID-19. For the latest information, visit the [Government of Canada's Animals and COVID-19 page](#).

If you're sick or isolating, have another person care for your animals. If this isn't possible, follow infection prevention and control measures:

- Minimize your direct contact with animals.
- Put on clean clothes before going out to the barn.
- Always wash your hands before and after touching animals, their food and supplies.
- Practice good coughing and sneezing (respiratory) etiquette.
- Wear a non-medical mask to care for your animals.
- Wear a medical mask if you work on a mink farm (only wear a non-medical mask if medical masks aren't available).

If you have questions or concerns, ask your veterinarian or a local public health professional.

III. Managing Risk During Business Operations

i. Communicating with your Workforce

- Ensure employees are informed of the risks, symptoms, and steps to self-isolate.
- Ensure your employees are aware of their responsibility to properly notify you if they are feeling unwell or at any risk of exposure to COVID-19 they may have encountered, and that they feel supported if they need to self-isolate.
- Communicate clearly with your employees about your sick leave policy. If you do not have one, templates are available in the [Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council AgriHR Toolkit](#).
- Download and print [posters on COVID-19 and preventative measures](#).
- Implement a hand-washing regime for all employees.

Resources and guidance on how to communicate with your workforce can be found [here](#).

ii. Implementing Physical Distancing

- The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person contact. Limit interactions by avoiding non-essential travel and carpooling.
- Consider adjusting schedules to avoid the likelihood of infection of all employees at the same time, by cohorting (e.g. splitting employees into shifts, alternating days, etc.)
- Stagger arrivals and break times for employees so they do not congregate in common spaces.
- Keep employees separated in designated areas and functions to limit interactions.
- Try to limit the number of employees using farm equipment. If possible, assign each employee to their own piece of equipment (e.g. tractor, truck, etc.).
- Limit number of face-to-face meetings. Consider alternatives such as conference calls or email.

Additional information on podding, bubbling and cohorting can be found [here](#).

In addition to the above, if physical distancing between people (2 metres) is not possible, you may need to consider Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). PPE is only effective if people wear it correctly. Ensure PPE training includes the fit, use, care, putting on and taking off, maintenance, cleaning and limitations of the PPE. Visit the [Workplace PPE Supplier Directory](#) to review a list of companies that sell PPE.

Some examples of PPE considerations for agriculture workers include:

- Single-use gloves can help limit contact with certain surfaces, products, etc. Set up practices for suitable disposal or change when soiled. Be sure you consider other hazards that may be present in the workplace before introducing gloves – in some cases, gloves can be an 'entanglement' hazard and should not be worn.
- Goggles or face shields can help with barriers and separation too. They should be assigned to people and not shared but can be used regularly if kept clean. Be sure to consider how they will be assigned and cleaned if you determine you will use them.

iii. Making Risk Management Plans

- ❑ Ensure risk management and operational plans include pandemic plans. These plans should include identification of decisionmakers, roles and responsibilities, access to medical care, plans for quarantine and/or transportation to medical facilities. They should also include communications planning, such as: who is the point of contact, medical contacts, internal and external communication plans, staff contact information, suppliers, and community services.
- ❑ The risk management plan should also identify what to do if staff are not available to conduct time-sensitive work (e.g. milking, strawberry picking) when not enough employees are available to do the work because of illness. This may include having agreements with surrounding farmers for back-up support.
- ❑ Review Public Health of Canada's [Risk-informed decision-making guidelines for workplaces and businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).
- ❑ If your business uses international agricultural workers, review the [COVID-19 Resource Library for International Agricultural Workers and Employers](#).

iv. Cleaning and Sanitizing

Be sure to read the [Ontario government's guidance: Agriculture health and safety during COVID-19](#). Continue to monitor the [Public Health website](#) for updates regarding current health and safety protocols and promote the use of the online [Self-Assessment Tool](#).

Remember, COVID-19 can be spread by people who are asymptomatic. Someone who is infected may not yet, **or ever**, show symptoms or signs. Screening will only identify the symptomatic population, so it can easily spread undetected.

Commonly used cleaners and disinfectants are effective against COVID-19, and you should only use disinfectants that have a Drug Identification Number (DIN). A DIN is an 8-digit number given by Health Canada that confirms the product is approved for use in Canada. Additionally, check the expiry date of products you use and always follow manufacturer's instructions. Visit Health Canada's website to [learn more about disinfectants and COVID-19](#).

- ❑ Regularly clean and disinfect:
 - frequently touched surfaces (e.g. workstations, countertops, fridge/freezer doors, light switches, doorknobs, etc.);
 - entry points to farm structures, common spaces, breakrooms, bathrooms and showers, between uses, and at the end of the day;
 - ventilation and fan equipment; and
 - farm equipment, tools, and machinery.
- ❑ Wearing gloves, wash and dry shared materials (e.g. towels, kitchen utensils, pens) between uses, and disinfect clothing hampers.
- ❑ Increase ventilation in mechanically ventilated buildings or rooms and/or open outside windows to increase air circulation, while following biosecurity protocols.
- ❑ Continue to follow biosecurity protocols and food safety standards at all times.

v. Supporting Mental Health and Wellbeing

If you are experiencing personal mental distress or someone you know is in immediate danger, please call 9-1-1. If you or anyone close to you requires support at this time, OFA has also developed a list of [resources to help farmers with managing stress](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ontario government [has announced an expansion of online and virtual mental health supports](#), including [BounceBack](#), to help Ontarians navigating the difficult realities in the wake of COVID-19.

If your employees are feeling anxious about the COVID-19 situation, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) provides employers with [6 tips for responding to employee anxiety](#) about COVID-19.

IV. Resources

Everyone involved in your farm business has a role to play in reducing risk and improving safety on the farm. There are many resources to assist your business in navigating the challenges of COVID-19, including those listed below and many other government, commodity and industry sources. Continue to monitor public health agencies and government websites for the latest health and safety information.

[OFA's COVID-19 page](#)

[Canadian Federation of Agriculture \(CFA\) COVID-19 page](#)

[Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council \(CAHRC\)'s COVID-19 page](#)

[Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association \(OFVGA\)'s COVID-19 page](#)

[Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada \(AAFC\) COVID-19 page](#)

[Canadian Food Inspection Agency COVID-19 page](#)

[Health Canada's COVID-19 Symptom Self-Assessment Tool](#)

[Health Canada's COVID-19 page](#)

[COVID-19 Resource Library for International Agricultural Workers and Employers](#)

[Ontario's Agriculture health and safety during COVID-19 on farms](#)

Ontario's COVID-19 response program includes [BounceBack](#) for mental health support

[Ontario's Farming operations hiring contract workers](#)

Ontario's [online and virtual mental health supports](#)

[Ontario's Working with farm operators to stop the spread of COVID-19](#)

[WSPS COVID-19 Sector-Specific Health and Safety Guidance Documents](#)

[OMAFRA Prevention, Control and Outbreak Support Strategy for COVID-19 in Ontario's Farm Workers](#)

[OMAFRA Modular/Temporary Housing Guide](#)

[OMAFRA Agriculture and agri-food industry safety during COVID-19](#)

[OMAFRA Mental Health for Farmers – First Aid Kit](#)