

Preparing Your Farm for Impacts of COVID-19

What is COVID-19?

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory disease caused by a novel coronavirus (official name: SARS-CoV-2) that was identified in 2019. This virus is responsible for the respiratory disease outbreak that began in Wuhan, China in late 2019 and quickly circulated around the globe. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (CDC, 2020).

How is COVID-19 transmitted and who is at risk?

The virus that causes COVID-19 is transmitted through close contact with infected individuals (CDC, 2020). Anyone can contract the disease, but symptom severity can vary among individuals. Those who are over age 60, have an underlying medical condition (i.e., diabetes, heart disease, lung disease) or are immunocompromised, are at greatest risk for developing severe symptoms related to the disease (CDC, 2020). While the mortality rate is low (~1.5%), a significant portion of those infected do require advanced medical care (CDC, 2020). If resources limit the number of people who are able to receive advanced care, mortality rate will likely increase.

Should I be worried about COVID-19 infecting my animals?

Although there is a coronavirus strain that does affect cattle (Bovine coronavirus), there is no indication that the SARS-CoV-2 virus affects cattle. The Bovine coronavirus attacks the respiratory system and the lower gastrointestinal tract of cattle and generally causes diarrhea in calves and respiratory distress in adult cattle (Saif, 2010). Unlike the virus that causes COVID-19, there is a vaccine that producers can administer to their cattle to prevent Bovine coronavirus.

What steps can I take to protect my farm from impacts of COVID-19?

All farms will likely be impacted by COVID-19 in some capacity. It is important for producers to develop a plan and be prepared for COVID-19-related issues should certain scenarios become reality.

What should producers prepare for?

1. ***Variable Milk and Livestock Prices*** – The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the U.S. and world economy and long-term effects are not yet known. These events have already begun affecting milk and livestock prices and the extent and duration of these impacts likely will not be seen for many months. Although the outlook for milk prices was fairly positive at the beginning of 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly squelched optimism. There are many unknowns contributing to the uncertainty of financial effects of COVID-19 on dairy and livestock producers. Some of that uncertainty stems from actions that indirectly affect the demand for animal products, including “stay-at-home” orders, mass cancellations of gatherings, school closures, and the discontinuation of dine-in service at restaurants. The extent of the effect

that COVID-19 will have on U.S. agricultural exports is also largely unknown at this time. During times of such economic uncertainty, producers should develop a plan to cope with the possibility of sustained low prices and reduced income.

2. ***Potential Supply-chain Disruptions*** – This, perhaps, is the area that is of immediate concern for many dairy and livestock producers. While agriculture and its supporting industries have been deemed “essential” by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, there is no guarantee that all potential disruptions will be completely avoided. At some point, the outbreak of COVID-19 may cause (or, in some cases, has already caused) disruption in one or more of the following areas: milk pick-up schedules, livestock auctions/sales, feed deliveries, veterinary services, and supply deliveries. In addition to disruptions in supply delivery schedules, supply availability may also come into play given that many day-to-day supplies are not manufactured domestically. While these disruptions are out of their control, producers should communicate with necessary suppliers and prepare for the possibility for each of these scenarios. If a scheduled milk pick-up is delayed, producers should be prepared to dump milk. Producers should ensure that they have a few extra days’ worth of supplies or feed on hand in case deliveries are delayed. Planning ahead and placing orders earlier, if possible, can help ease anxiety and fears of such occurrences.

What should producers do right now?

1. ***Encourage regular hand washing*** – Producers should ensure ample access to soap and water at hand-washing stations and hand sanitizer in areas such as bathrooms, break rooms, and milking parlors. Producers should also remind workers of proper hand-washing protocol. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends washing with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are unavailable, hand sanitizer with an alcohol content of 60% or more can be used. Handwashing should take place regularly, especially after sneezing, using the restroom, visiting a public area, and before eating.
2. ***Limit close contact with others*** – Producers should postpone any non-essential face-to-face meetings until a later date. The CDC recommends individuals avoid close contact with others (i.e., social distancing) whenever possible.
3. ***Clean high-touch surfaces regularly*** – Producers and workers should practice regular disinfection of common, high-touch surfaces, such as doorknobs, bathrooms, computers, phones, light switches, etc. Bleach-based, alcohol-based (>70%), or general household disinfecting solutions should be effective in sanitizing surfaces (CDC, 2020). The virus that causes COVID-19 can survive on surfaces for hours or even days after contamination (CDC, 2020).

4. ***Have a plan if you or a significant portion of the workforce becomes ill*** – Producers should devise a plan that includes a contingency for labor and a list of daily essential chores in case they or a significant portion of their workforce becomes ill. Due to the highly contagious nature of COVID-19, producers should prepare for the possibility that a portion of the farm workforce could become ill. Producers and workers should not to come to work if they are experiencing a fever, cough, or respiratory distress to prevent further spread of the virus.
5. ***Minimize trips to public places*** – This recommendation goes along with number 2. When public outings are unavoidable, such as a trip to the grocery or hardware store, care should be taken to avoid contact with high-touch surfaces as much as possible. Following an outing, producers and workers should be diligent about washing or sanitizing hands afterward. *Quick tip:* keep a bottle of hand sanitizer in the truck and get into the habit of using it each time you get in.
6. ***Practice self-care*** – Many producers are so busy taking care of their animals that they neglect to take care of themselves. Practices such as eating a balanced diet, drinking plenty of water, managing stress, and getting plenty of rest all promote good health and wellbeing. Although it is difficult for many producers to fit all of these practices into their busy schedules, maintaining these healthy habits will help support immune function and build strength should they be confronted with an illness such as COVID-19.

Where can I find more information about COVID-19?

The CDC has a website dedicated to providing daily updates regarding the spread of COVID-19. The CDC also has several fact sheets available that explain in further detail how COVID-19 is spread, who is at higher risk, and how individuals can help minimize exposure and transmission. Visit <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html> for more information.

References:

Saif, L. J. .2010. Bovine Respiratory Coronavirus. Vet. Clin. North Am. Food Anim. Pract. 349–364. <https://doi.org/10.1038/jid.2014.371>

Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2020. Situation Summary. Accessed March 18, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/summary.html>

This article was written by Dr. Sarah Potts, Dairy & Beef Extension Specialist and Jeff Semler, Extension Educator.