

Communicating With Dairy Farm Employees in the Time of Coronavirus (COVID-19)

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It seems as if the world we are living in now resembles a sci-fi movie. Unfortunately, however, the events are real and are hurting a lot of people and our economy. Agricultural workers are essential employees, and their daily commitment to the job is primordial to the sustainability of the sector. Most of our dairy farm employees are from Hispanic heritage.

COVID-19 is a global health crisis, and the majority of the countries are attempting to prevent or control it, responding in diverse ways to the coronavirus spread. We, the professionals and workers in the Ag sector who have family abroad, are continually hearing or reading the news from both international press and family members. We should be aware that some Hispanic countries (e.g. Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador) announcements to their population include:

- One person at a time can grocery shop
- Lockdown of states within the rest of the country
- No outdoor activity is allowed
- Public curfews to control possible spread
- Law enforcement and armed forces are on patrol ensuring rules are being followed

In the U.S., many states and counties are experiencing the closure of businesses considered nonessential. Banks are operating online, and 24/7 groceries are closing earlier. We are also experiencing a lack of food availability, and necessary home items, mostly due to restocking issues.

Most of the kids are attending classes online due to school closings, and many parents work from home, juggling work and homeschooling at the same time. However, many parents do not have enough knowledge and background with the U.S online system to guide their children through school activities.

All messages coming from cell phones, TV, Facebook, emails, and radio are asking us to practice social distancing and stay at home. However, dairy workers cannot remain at home or follow social distancing when most of the farm positions require team group work to complete their daily tasks. We should realize that we might have people with limited ability to obtain and understand essential information related to COVID-19.

Communication has always been a key in any farm operation. In today's environment, clear communication with your employees is more than crucial due to COVID-19 impact. It is essential to explain to our dairy farm employees that for a period that may last a couple of months or more, we will experience some changes, and we must take extra precautions at work. We need to update all the information regularly and give a clear message to the workers according to each state's government response effort to the Coronavirus for the dairy industry. Remember, most dairy employees have low literacy rates, low Spanish written understanding, and no English language proficiency.

We are all dependent on our agricultural workforce, and we are all emotionally vulnerable due to the current worldwide situation. In this regard, the situation puts us in a very vulnerable position where we cannot assume everyone understands what to do, how to protect themselves and others. In this type of crisis, "common sense" does not always come easily, considering how each person responds to stress and real or perceived needs and threats.

Below we are a few strategies dairies can adopt to avoid creating "anguish":

1) Coronavirus and livestock. Clearly state to your employees that there is currently no evidence that livestock animals can be a source of COVID-19 for humans or that this virus can cause disease in livestock. However, it is essential to change clothes from the farm when they get home.

2) Cleaning farm common areas: bathroom, breakroom, locker room. Provide enough cleaning products to keep these areas clean and to disinfect all surfaces daily. Post prevention notices in these areas. There are fact sheets available in both Spanish and English: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/factsheets.html>.

3) Flu or cold-like symptoms. Provide clear directions about what to do if employees experience symptoms such as fever and dry cough. Provide contact phone numbers of the people who will respond at the dairy (i.e. manager, herdsman, HR). Include phone numbers for the nearest health clinic or hospital that are prepared to handle COVID-19.

4) Housing at the dairies. Clearly state to your employees that until further notice, only employees who reside in the homes owned by the dairy can access the homes. Explain the importance of keeping the housing clean and surfaces disinfected. It would also be essential to keep employees from the same work shift living together for a while, so quarantine is easier to handle if one employee tests positive for the coronavirus.

5) Work shifts. We recommend physically separating work lockers and changing rooms by shift, if possible. This will minimize the risk of having all your employees quarantined at the same time if one is positive for coronavirus. If not, clean and disinfect the area daily, preferably between shifts. If possible, allow for at least a 30 min interval/space between the arrival and departure of different shifts to minimize interactions between personnel.

6) Grocery shopping. Clearly state that employees should be extra careful when grocery shopping or when filling up the car tank with gas. They should immediately and frequently wash their hands. Also, recommend they limit their shopping trips to a minimum, buying groceries and essentials for a week or two at a time if possible.

7) Farm training. Regular farm training with external personnel coming to the farms should be avoided. If there is a need to train new personnel, there are available resources that can be delivered online or through a recorded video.

8) Practicing patience. Be patient. In this time of crisis, everybody has many things going through their minds. The dairy owner and management team would, for sure, be managing their stressors, but they need to be conscious of how scared and confused workers could be too. Listen to them and help them as much as you can, to do their job correctly, and weather this crisis at home. Let's commit to each other to do everything we can to slow down the virus spreading, but do not forget to be patient, friendly and helpful to each other at all times.

9) Effective communication. Communicate often and clearly to ensure workers are informed about what's going on and avoid the spread of false or inaccurate ideas. Frequent communication with employees will also allow you and your managers to keep your operation running smoothly without the need of much "personal contact." Encouraging messages are certainly appreciated. Record a video message saying their work is appreciated and send it to their phones. Use WhatsApp messaging system as many employees use it to communicate with their families and friends abroad and know how to use it.

Example: Dear "Name of the Farm" employees, I would like to thank you for your commitment during this uncertain time. We will overcome this pandemic together. Please continue taking care of each other". In Spanish: Estimados empleados de "Nombre de la granja", me gustaría agradecerles por su compromiso durante este tiempo de incertidumbre. Juntos venceremos esta pandemia. Por favor, sigamos cuidándonos unos a otros.

For more information visit: www.cdc.gov.

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