

COVID-19 Testing on Your Farm or Packing Shed—Why It Is Important *Elizabeth Higgins, CCE Eastern NY Commercial Horticulture*

I just drove my daughter to college in Western, NY. Prior to arrival she needed to send the school a recent negative COVID test, watch a training video on COVID, and self-quarantine at home for a week prior to arriving at school. Campuses across the nation have varied greatly in the measures they have taken, and many are already experiencing outbreaks as students arrive back to campus.

Likewise, many farms across the US are experiencing COVID outbreaks as harvest workers arrive from other places. It is easy to get complacent about COVID-19 in New York, our numbers of new cases have been going down and testing has improved. But unfortunately, we are not out of the woods yet. Many of the workers who are coming into NYS for fall harvest are arriving from places where COVID is more widespread and where social distancing and other protective measures like wearing masks has not been as consistently adopted. It is therefore important that you help to keep your farm's workers safe during the harvest and packing season. The best way to do this is to test your workers as they arrive, quarantine new arrivals, keeping them separate from the resident workers until they have a negative test result or show no symptoms and train all workers in best practices for reducing the spread of COVID19, especially wearing a mask, handwashing, and social distancing.

The surest way to have an outbreak spread is to not be aware of an outbreak occurring at your farm or food processing facility, so employing a preventative strategy is wise. In Ulster County and Clinton County the NYS Department of Health is setting up on-farm COVID testing to allow you to test your workers as they come in. Because some folks can be carriers of COVID and not show symptoms, it is important to test everyone, not just workers who appear to be sick. Identifying and quarantining COVID positive workers as soon as possible can help to reduce the chance that you will have a large-scale outbreak on your farm. If you are outside these counties, there are other resources for testing, contact your county health department or you can contact me at emh56@cornell.edu and I will help you identify options.

It's never a convenient time of year to add another burden onto a farm's plate, and that goes more than double for the onboarding process nearing harvest time. Housing availability and cost is clearly a difficult issue to address as is a potential two-week loss of employees during quarantine if they are found to be positive. But, keeping the farm employees safe, and the farmer and the farmer's own family safe, is of paramount importance. Catching two positives now (as occurred in an Ulster County farm earlier this summer) may mean you avoid transmitting the virus to the entire farm. While despite your best efforts, COVID may still spread, you will at least know that you did

what you could do. In Washington State, a young worker from Mexico on a fruit farm died of COVID, and the farm is being investigated for not following guidance on housing. These are all part of the exceptionally complicated calculations farmers and public health officials are now making during COVID-19.

Resources:

NYS COVID Farm Testing Initiative. <https://agriculture.ny.gov/coronavirus> Farm operators who employ temporary workers from outside of New York State and that are located in Clinton, Genesee, Orleans, Ulster and/or Wayne Counties can participate in the COVID-19 testing initiative. Testing is voluntary, free and will be set-up at sites selected by the farms who wish to participate. Farm operators should register to participate in a testing event by clicking on the link. Once registered, a representative from the mobile testing team will contact you.

<https://app.smartsheet.com/b/form/78fd67f98e104d1c95f533cb8ac9c200>

Safe Harvest 2020: COVID-19 Office Hours for Producers and Packers Tuesdays in September at 4:00 PM. Offered by Cornell Ag Workforce Development and CCE. Producers and packers can join the event by computer or phone and can ask any COVID-19 related question. Last week questions addressed topics such as: testing strategies, face shields, establishing cohorts, and returning to work after recovering. Please sign up here, and also send us any questions you might have in advance when you register.

<https://cornell.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJYkcuqppz0sGNw2GGkaMiwMhibxQfxq7KuE>

NYS County COVID19 tracker - <https://covid19tracker.health.ny.gov/views/NYS-COVID19-Tracker/NYSDOHCOVID-19Tracker-Map?%3Aembed=yes&%3Atoolbar=no&%3Atabs=n>