

Limiting the Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Your Dairy Farm

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It is amazing how things can change in a few weeks. As the cases of COVID-19 grow across the globe and here in Canada, it is time to be cautious and practice good biosecurity on our farms. We must do our part to prevent the spread of this virus and use our position as leaders in our communities to help encourage others to do the same.

Here in Ontario, veterinary medicine and most forms of agriculture (including dairy production) have been deemed to be essential services. While we are still allowed to go about our daily business, we should all strive to make changes to help protect ourselves, our families, and our employees. We should also do our best to protect the service providers that are critical in keeping our farms operational.

During the times when you are out in a field driving a tractor or up at midnight calving out a heifer, you sure feel alone and isolated on your farm. But at other times, whether it be the veterinarian, nutritionist, milk truck driver, AI technician, hoof trimmer, milking equipment dealer or many others, the list of visitors to your farm can get quite long. Once you factor in the number of other farms these visitors travel to in the same day and also where the staff on your farm travel to, you soon realize you aren't as isolated as you thought. The number of interactions between you and those around you can increase exponentially.

The following are some general recommendations to consider during the COVID-19 outbreak:

- **Hand Hygiene** – Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water on a frequent basis and especially after having any contact with a person or animal
- **Self isolate if feeling sick or have a cough or fever** – Any employee or family member who is showing any signs of being sick should not come to work / come in the barn. They will be putting other staff members at risk in addition to your farm service providers. The COVID-19 assessment tool should be used by anyone who thinks they have coronavirus symptoms or has been in contact with someone that has: <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/self-assessment/#q0>
- **Social Distancing** – Try and limit any unnecessary calls to service providers, but if a visit is required stay at least 6 feet apart (a cow length!) and try to minimize any contact. Wearing gloves and frequent hand washing is recommended if close contact is unavoidable. Depending on what is required, your service provider may be able to assist you remotely or over the phone.
- **Only allow essential and necessary visitors** – Many routine services – DHI milk testing, proaction validations have been temporarily put on hold but consider delaying any other non-essential visits until it is deemed safe.

- **Call Ahead** - Please contact your vet or other service provider if you do have a routine visit scheduled or if you need to pick up medication to determine what special precautions they may be taking. Many veterinary clinics have put policies in place to help protect staff and clients. If someone has been sick on your farm – an employee or family member and a visit is required, please let your service provider know so they can take extra pre-cautions when coming to your farm.
- **Have a plan in place for a staff shortage** - Whether a staff member needs to stay home and quarantine/self isolate due to symptoms of COVID-19 or, worst case scenario, tests positive for coronavirus, it will be helpful to have a plan in place. It could involve operating with a skeleton staff or having two separate shifts of employees. Cross training employees for roles or responsibilities that they don't normally perform can also be useful when you are short staffed.
- **Mental Health**- Working in agriculture can be stressful at the best of times. With all the extra uncertainty from COVID-19 and its impact on our health and the economy, it is important to take care of yourself. Remember to ask your staff and family members how they are doing regularly. Your family and support network are great resources to help to get your mind off of the current situation and relax. Even if you can't go visit friends and family as we did before – they are only a phone call, text or video call away. There are also several professional counsellors who are available to help during this uncertain time. Do not hesitate to contact them.

Practicing good biosecurity at your farm is currently a top priority for human health; however, even beyond COVID-19, a good biosecurity protocol can also have an impact on the health of your herd. You don't have to visit many pig or poultry barns to realize that they are taking biosecurity very seriously. While we all do our part – whether it is cleaning boots, changing coveralls between farms, etc – we can do more. It might make things more difficult for visitors to your farm but if it is going to increase the health and productivity of your herd, it is a worthwhile inconvenience. Many changes we are implementing now may be worth keeping in place moving forward to prevent the spread of disease between farms – whether human or animal.

It is times like these that we should remain calm and appreciate what we have. We are thankful in an industry that is helping our community. We are providing food for those that are sick, dealing with a job loss or dealing with uncertainty during these trying times. We should continue to do everything to help keep our family, friends and community safe and with the supplies that they need.