

Coronavirus Backgrounder

Background

On December 31, 2019, pneumonia cases of unknown background were reported in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. Later on, January 9, 2020, the China Center for Disease Control and Prevention reported a novel coronavirus as the cause of this outbreak, coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19).

Coronaviruses have been identified as human pathogens since the 1960s and infect humans and animals. Illnesses in humans are respiratory or gastrointestinal infections; however, symptoms can range from the common cold to more severe lower respiratory infections.

How easily a virus spreads from person-to-person also can vary. Some viruses are highly contagious, e.g., measles, while other viruses do not spread as easily. Another factor is whether the spread is sustained, which means it goes from person-to-person without stopping. The virus that causes COVID-19 spreads easily and sustainably among people.

A person can contract COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching his or her mouth, nose or eyes. This is not thought to be the only way that the virus spreads.

Prevention

The best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed. Taking simple steps such as social distancing, washing your hands and cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces reduces your risk of contracting COVID-19.

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services has recommendations including: Staying at home and avoiding gatherings of 10 or more. If you are sick, stay home.

State Response

Wisconsin's experience with COVID-19 started on Feb. 5, 2020. A Dane County resident was the first to test positive for COVID-19. Two weeks later, he/she was released from quarantine. The second case was not confirmed until March 9. On March 12, Governor Tony Evers issued Executive Order 72 declaring a state of emergency in response to the coronavirus.

A section of EO 72 directed the National Guard to respond as necessary to incidents involving COVID-19. This included being available for the spring election.

The following day, Gov. Evers closed public school statewide leading many school districts to seek waivers from state laws requiring a specified number of educational contacts. Wisconsin Department of Instruction approved waivers that were submitted allowing school districts to end educational instruction early.

School districts are taking a cautious approach to next fall leading to speculation that some school districts could continue online learning or other alternative learning options.

On March 17, Gov. Evers ordered bars and restaurants to close and banned gatherings of 10 or more people as confirmed cases reached 72. Shortages of testing equipment also forced the state to become more stringent with who could be tested.

A week later, Gov. Evers issued Executive Order 12, known as Safer at Home, defining and banning non-essential travel and business. When the order went into effect, there was an increase in unemployment insurance requests as unemployment rates increased from near record lows of 3.5 percent to a record high of 14 percent. EO 12 remained in effect until April 24.

On April 16, Gov. Evers issued EO 28 extending the Safer at Home order until May 26. Three weeks later, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled against the Safer at Home order after a challenge from Senator Scott Fitzgerald (R-Juneau) and Wisconsin Speaker Robin Vos (R-Rochester).

This resulted in counties and municipalities issuing Safer at Home edicts and allowed businesses to open at different levels of capacities.

On March 27th, 2020, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) which provided over \$2 trillion in economic relief to those affected by the coronavirus outbreak. The bill directed more than \$48 billion to agricultural programs including \$14 billion to the Commodity Credit Corporation for reimbursement of the net realized losses that were not previously reimbursed. The CARES Act also established the \$150 billion Coronavirus Relief Fund which provides payments to State, Local, and Tribal governments. Wisconsin received \$1.9 billion of this funding to be distributed by Governor Evers.

On May 20, Gov. Evers announced the state would direct \$50 million in federal COVID-19 aid to Wisconsin farmers struggling with the economic fallout of the pandemic. The Wisconsin Farm Support Program is being administered by the Department of Revenue and payments are expected to be received in mid-July.

To date, the U.S. Congress has passed four relief packages totaling more than \$2.4 trillion, which is larger than the economies of all but six other nations. There is a Phase 4 COVID 9 relief package that is currently being negotiated by Congress.

The American Farm Bureau Federation and Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation will continue to advocate on behalf of farmers as negotiations continue.

Discussion Questions

Does WFBF's policy adequately address issues that have been raised during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- U.S. Congress and Gov. Evers have changed agriculture policy leaving little time to gather input from members on policy related topics.

How does COVID-19 change the agriculture industry?

- COVID-19 and the resulting shut down of businesses, restaurants and schools exposed the vulnerabilities of the supply chain. What can we learn and how do we build a better, more flexible supply chain?

As businesses, restaurants and schools are shut down, which closed markets for farmers, there will be businesses and restaurants that don't reopen. What does that mean for farmers when markets don't fully come back?

- There are business owners who are announcing they are not reopening, closing markets for farmers. Who should connect farmers and processors so there is minimal disruption for businesses, restaurants and schools?

What happens if schools don't come back in the fall and continue online learning?

- Farmers should prepare for a scenario that doesn't include primary education returning in the fall and the implications to the food service industry that will occur as a result.

For more information regarding the federal response to COVID-19, reference the included Federal Response material in a separate document.