

Frequently asked questions about COVID-19 and agriculture

Is agriculture considered critical industry?

Absolutely. Food and agriculture is recognized by the US Department of Homeland Security as being one 16 critical infrastructures for national security. The guidance document from Homeland Security, with an addition from NCDA&S lists the critical infrastructure workers in food and agriculture as:

- Workers supporting groceries, pharmacies and other retail that sells food and beverage products
- Restaurant carry-out and quick serve food operations - Carry-out and delivery food employees
- Food manufacturer employees and their supplier employees—to include those employed in food processing(packers, meat processing, cheese plants, milk plants, produce, etc.) facilities; livestock, poultry, seafood slaughter facilities; pet and animal feed processing facilities; human food facilities producing by-products for animal food; beverage production facilities; and the production of food packaging
- Farm workers to include those employed in animal food, feed, and ingredient production, packaging, and distribution; manufacturing, packaging, and distribution of veterinary drugs; truck delivery and transport; farm and fishery labor needed to produce our food supply domestically
- Farm workers and support service workers to include those who field crops; commodity inspection; fuel ethanol facilities; storage facilities; and other agricultural inputs
- Employees and firms supporting food, feed, and beverage distribution, including warehouse workers, vendor-managed inventory controllers and blockchain managers
- Workers supporting the sanitation of all food manufacturing processes and operations from wholesale to retail
- Company cafeterias - in-plant cafeterias used to feed employees
- Workers in food testing labs in private industries and in institutions of higher education
- Workers essential for assistance programs and government payments

- Employees of companies engaged in the production of chemicals, medicines, vaccines, and other substances used by the food and agriculture industry, including pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, minerals, enrichments, and other agricultural production aids
- Animal agriculture workers to include those employed in veterinary health; manufacturing and distribution of animal medical materials, animal vaccines, animal drugs, feed ingredients, feed, and bedding, etc.; transportation of live animals, animal medical materials; transportation of deceased animals for disposal; raising of animals for food; animal production operations; slaughter and packing plants and associated regulatory and government workforce
- Workers who support the manufacture and distribution of forest products, including, but not limited to timber, paper, and other wood products
- Employees engaged in the manufacture and maintenance of equipment and other infrastructure necessary to agricultural production and distribution
- Agriculture workers supporting the green industry to include nursery operations, garden centers, landscape and maintenance companies critical to the environmental and physical living conditions necessary in our communities.

Do the transportation waivers in the Governor’s Executive Orders apply to agricultural-related businesses?

Yes. Executive Order No. 116 suspended the weighing of vehicles “used to transport livestock, poultry, or crops to include timber ready to be harvested and feed to livestock and poultry.” Executive Order No. 119 amended sections 5 and 6 of Executive Order No. 116 to waive the maximum hours of service and the weighing of vehicles if the driver is transporting “medical supplies, essential fuels, food, water, and other supplies and equipment in support of the Plan or other efforts to address the public health threat posed by COVID-19.” As stated above, agriculture is considered critical infrastructure and the new language in the waivers is broad to encompass the variety of transportation needs and workers encompassed under this critical infrastructure. These waivers are generally not meant to be used for normal operations, but rather to the extent you need them due to the public health threat posed by COVID-19. However, the operations of agriculture and the food systems are needed to combat the threat of COVID-19. Also, have your drivers carry a copy of Executive Orders Nos. 116 and 118 and documentation of what loads they are carrying in case they are stopped by law enforcement.

Here is a link to an article where DOT answers questions about livestock hauler exemptions.

Is my agricultural-related business allowed to be open for business?

Yes. NCDA&CS encourages businesses in food and agriculture, especially food production and distribution facilities, to continue operations. Governor Cooper’s Executive Orders 117 and 118 place restrictions on gatherings of 100 people or more as well as the operations of restaurants and bars. FAQs for the Governor’s Executive Orders can be found here: FAQ for 117 and FAQ for

118. Guidance to businesses in North Carolina can be found from the NC Department of Health Human Services COVID-19 website. This is a changing situation and businesses should continue to monitor new developments.

Are Farmers Markets open?

Yes. In NC, farmers markets fall under the same classification as grocery stores and are considered an important source of food for local communities. Farmers markets who choose to operate during the COVID-19 outbreak are required to follow the same federal or state mandated directives as grocery stores on issues such as social distancing, or crowd size (if indoor). In addition, restaurants located at farmers markets are also subject to Executive Order No. 118. There is no evidence to suggest COVID-19 is a food-borne illness.

NCDA&CS operates four State Farmers Markets (located in Ashville, Charlotte, Colfax and Raleigh) and intends to keep them open and follow any guidance concerning grocery stores and retail outlets. To help ensure the safety of farmers market vendors and visitors, market staff is encouraging social distancing, proper hand washing, reduced contact with products and has stopped product sampling. Information, opening times, and availability of produce and other food items can be found on the NCDA&CS Farmers Markets website.

Is our food supply safe?

Yes. From the US Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) FAQs on food safety and COVID-19, "Currently there is no evidence of food or food packaging being associated with transmission of COVID-19.

Unlike foodborne gastrointestinal (GI) viruses like norovirus and hepatitis A that often make people ill through contaminated food, SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19, is a virus that causes respiratory illness. Foodborne exposure to this virus is not known to be a route of transmission.

The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person. This includes between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet), and through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads. However, it's always critical to follow the 4 key steps of food safety—clean, separate, cook, and chill – to prevent foodborne illness.”

What is NCDA&CS doing during this COVID-19 situation?

NCDA&CS is committed to a safe, stable, and abundant food supply at all times and especially during times of crisis. Critical NCDA&CS services which protect the safety of food for

consumers, support farmers and the food supply system, and keep agricultural and food system commerce flowing are our highest priorities. Following guidelines issued by NC Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS), we have taken steps to protect our employees and the critical roles they play in order to keep these programs and services in place.

We have engaged state and national leaders on the issues listed above as well as providing significant input on measures which need to be in place to produce food in 2020. For example, planting season is upon us and much of NC agriculture, including our fresh fruit and vegetable production depends on H2A guest worker farm labor. We have been engaged with the Department of Homeland Security and the US State Department to ensure those guest workers wishing to come to North Carolina remain able to do so.

The NCDA&CS Food Distribution division is delivering needed food to many school districts around the state as they provide meals for children out of school as well as food banks in North Carolina whose valuable service are becoming increasingly important. Additionally, the Marketing Division is working with farmers, wholesalers, and retailers to ensure NC products reach the consumer in different ways in light of the change to restaurants and food service facilities. We continue our commitment to operate the four State Farmers Markets.

NCDA&CS remains committed to serving agriculture and all of North Carolina during this difficult time.