Ministry of Health

COVID-19 Guidance: On-Farm Outbreak Management

Version 1 – September 21, 2020

This guidance provides basic information for local boards of health and is not intended to take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, legal advice or requirements. In the event of any conflict between this guidance and any applicable emergency orders, or directives issued by the Minister of Health or the Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH), or local Medical Officers of Health, the order or directive prevails.

The document is intended to assist with minimizing COVID-19 transmission from individuals working or residing on farms and to prevent, detect, and manage individual cases and outbreaks of COVID-19 within these settings.

This document should be used in conjunction with applicable Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labour Training and Skills Development (MLTSD) requirements, guidance, and relevant legislation (e.g., *Occupational Health and Safety Act*), including:

- Public Health Management of Case and Contacts of COVID-19 in Ontario

- COVID-19 Guidance: Workplace Outbreaks (includes MLTSD role)

- COVID-19 Guidance: Congregate Living for Vulnerable Populations

Additional resources available from Public Health Ontario include:

- Checklist: COVID-19 Prevention and Preparedness in Congregate Living Settings

- Checklist: Managing COVID-19 Outbreaks in Congregate Living Settings

All efforts should be taken to limit the risk of COVID-19 transmission in these settings.

Role of the Local Public Health Unit and Medical Officer of Health

The local public health unit and Medical Officer of Health are responsible for the public health management of COVID-19, including the investigation and coordination of an outbreak response, and providing guidance and recommendations to workplaces. The content of this document should not be interpreted as superseding the advice and recommendations of the Medical Officer of Health or designate.

Under the Occupational Health and Safety Act, employers have the duty to take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of their workers. This includes taking steps to protect workers from the hazards posed by infectious diseases.

Preventing COVID-19 Transmission on Farms

COVID-19 is a virus that can spread when the droplets from talking, coughing or sneezing from an infected person are breathed in by anyone who is in close proximity to the infected person. Infected people with or without symptoms can transmit COVID-19. The risk may be heightened as a result of working and/or living with others that move or work between other farms.

The risk of spread appears higher indoors than outdoors, especially in closed, crowded spaces. This may include activities such as working, living, and other activities in close proximity. It is possible that COVID-19 can also spread by touching contaminated surfaces.

Limit or decrease congregate housing

- The key intervention to help prevent the transmission of COVID-19 is to identify and self-isolate any positive cases and to isolate close contacts. If a COVID-19 case is identified in a congregate setting, all workers who live in that setting are considered potential close contacts. This aligns with Ministry of Health guidance for managing COVID-19 cases and contacts that applies across Ontario.

- To avoid transmission in congregate settings, it is advised to consider housing standards in which physical distancing (at least 2 metres) and self-isolation is achievable, such as:

- o providing additional or alternate housing,
- o consider additional measures, such as private rooms or rooms with the fewest number of occupants,
- o decreasing bed occupancy to enable 2 metres distancing. If this is not possible, consider different strategies to keep residents apart (e.g., place beds head to foot or foot to foot, using temporary barriers between beds),
- o avoiding use of bunk beds,
- o limiting the number of people sharing washrooms, and
- o changing furniture placement to allow 2 metre distancing.
- This minimizes the number of close contacts, and therefore, if a case is identified within the workforce, fewer workers will be identified as close contacts and will be able to continue to work.
- Refer to COVID-19 Preparedness and Prevention in Congregate Living Settings for more information.

Limit work locations

- It is recommended that workers should only work at one agri-food location at a time. This includes workers that are contracted from third party employers (temporary agency workers).

Cohorting

- Workers are to be cohorted into small groups (i.e. work team or crew) that work together consistently (e.g. a particular greenhouse or warehouse) only.
- Cohort sizes should be as small as possible.
- Each cohort should stay physically distant from other cohorts when possible.
- Cohorts of workers living in different congregate settings should never interact within 2 metres.
- Workers who live together in a congregate setting are considered a cohort and this grouping should be maintained at the workplace as much as possible.
- Workers who live together in a congregate setting should not be assigned to cohorts with any workers living in a different congregate setting.
- A cohort list should be used to track workers in the cohort for contact tracing purposes.

- Decentralizing accommodations whenever possible and accommodating work teams together: All workers living in a bunkhouse together and working together as part of the same work team or crew.

- Mixing between teams should be minimized.

- Scheduling work teams to start and finish work and take breaks at the same time each day.

- Limiting social activities to only those within their bunkhouse or work team.

- Keeping the number of workers using common areas as small as possible.

- Arranging bus schedules or shuttles to carry the same groups of workers together (see Guidance for carpooling for more information on group travel).

- For more information, see Cohorting in Congregate Living Settings during an Outbreak.

- Employers of agri-food facilities can also review the Congregate Living Setting Resources Toolkit, an overview of resources for those working on COVID-19 prevention and response in congregate living settings (e.g., shelters, group homes, supportive housing).

Screen workers for COVID-19-like symptoms daily

- Employers should implement active COVID-19 screening for anyone entering the farm. For information on how to do this, see Screening Employees' Health Prior to entering the Workplace for the Agri-food Sector and COVID-19 Patient Screening Guidance Document.

- Anyone showing or reporting symptoms of COVID-19 should not be allowed to enter the farm and should be advised to wear a mask or face covering, immediately return to their residence, self-isolate within the housing accommodation and notify the employer – farm and help agency if there is one.

- A worker who has not passed the screening and has been told to return to their residence and self-isolate should be instructed to continue to self-monitor for symptoms such as fever, cough, or difficulty breathing.

- Employers should inform the local public health unit of any symptomatic individuals.

- All workers and employers can use the [Ministry of Health's online COVID-19 self-assessment tool](#) if they need help determining whether they should seek further care.

- Ensure that the following conditions are in place for personnel conducting active screening of workers:

  o screening tables are located in an area away from others and away from any high traffic areas, and

  o there is a supply of hand sanitizer at the screening table.

- If the screeners are able to maintain a distance of at least 2 metres from those being screened, or if they are able to be separated by a physical barrier such as a plexiglass barrier, the screener does not need to wear personal protective equipment (PPE) while screening, otherwise, the appropriate PPE should be worn:

  o mask or face covering;

  o gown;

  o gloves; and,

  o eye protection (goggles or face shield).

- Consult with [local community partners](#) to source PPE, if needed.

- Ensure all personal information is maintained in accordance with applicable privacy law and in such a manner as to protect personal privacy of employees.

- If COVID-19 is suspected or diagnosed in a worker, return to work should be determined in consultation with their employer, health care provider, and the local public health unit.

Establish an employee attendance policy

- Employers should ensure workers do not come to work sick.

- Employers should note increased absenteeism, including those from third party (e.g., temporary agency workers).

- Employers should keep updated lists of all workers, and up to date contact information including contact information for all temporary agency workers as well as contact information for third party employers for contact tracing purposes.

- Employers should have a clear procedure to notify a supervisor if a worker is sick.

- Workers should be aware of the financial compensation available should they be unable to work due to COVID-19.

Maximize physical distancing in all areas (including outdoor areas)

- Everyone should keep 2 metres from other people as much as possible. If it is not possible to maintain physical distancing, ensure workers wear a mask or face covering.

- Discourage employees from congregating both inside and outside the workplace.

- Ensure physical distancing (at least 2 metres) while in lunch rooms and meeting rooms. Stagger lunch breaks to allow only one cohort using the lunch room and meeting room at one time.

- Limit use of lunch room and meeting rooms to encourage physical distancing.

Modify the physical environment

- Consider installing physical barriers (e.g., plexiglass) where there is close contact between workers.

- Remove surplus furniture and supplies from walkways to allow ease of movement while maintaining physical distancing.

- Use tape or floor markings to help people maintain at least 2 metres between one another.

- Implement a unidirectional flow of traffic through the facility.

- Maximize fresh air exchange where possible.

Keep hands clean

- Provide access to handwashing stations and have alcohol-based hand sanitizers available at multiple, prominent locations in the workplace, including entrances and exits.

- Clean hands by washing with soap and water or using an alcohol-based (60-90% alcohol) hand sanitizer.

- Washing with soap and water is preferred if hands are visibly dirty.

- If gloves are being used, place them in the garbage (i.e., non-touch, lined waste receptacles, which should be placed throughout the workplace) after removing them, then clean hands.

- Ensure adequate supplies are maintained.

Cleaning and disinfectants

- Commonly-used cleaners and disinfectants are effective against COVID-19.

- In addition to routine cleaning, surfaces or areas that have frequent contact with hands (high-touch surfaces) should be cleaned and disinfected twice per day and when visibly dirty.

- Examples of high-touch surfaces include: door handles, counters, cabinet doors, elevator buttons, light switches, faucets, toilet handles, hand rails, touch screen surfaces, and keypads.

- Hand sanitizer and/or disinfectant wipes should be available in common areas.

- Only use disinfectants with a Drug Identification Number (DIN) issued by Health Canada that confirms they are approved for use in Canada. Follow manufacturer's instructions and check the expiry date of products.

- Maintain a cleaning log to track frequency of cleaning and disinfecting schedules.

- Clean washroom facilities regularly (twice daily for frequently touched surfaces, in addition to routine cleaning).

- Regularly clean and disinfect surfaces in housing provided for workers.

- Disinfect shared equipment (where sharing of equipment cannot be avoided).

- Post hygiene instructions in English, French and/or all majority workplace languages so everyone can understand how to do their part.

- For an easy to follow guide, check out A 'Quick and Dirty' Guide to Cleaning & Disinfecting Surfaces on the Farm.

- For more information visit Cleaning and Disinfection for Public Settings.

Source control masking and personal protective equipment

- Employers are responsible for assessing the hazards in their workplace and implementing control measures to reduce the risks to their workers.

- Most employers have little experience with infectious disease hazards and the control measures required. They will rely on public health advice to develop control measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission in the workplace.
- Masks or face coverings may be worn as source control. This should not be considered an alternative to other controls, such as physical distancing. It is a complementary method that can help to further reduce the risk of exposure.
- Employers should determine whether personal protective equipment (PPE), which may include procedure or surgical masks and eye protection, will be part of their hazard control plan. The need for PPE should be based on a risk assessment that includes the effectiveness of other controls and may take into consideration input from the local public health unit (e.g., about the level of risk in the community).
- Consideration should be given to the potential for health and safety issues created by masks (e.g. potential for getting caught in machinery), any need for work accommodations (e.g. health conditions, communication), and the appropriateness of the mask for the situation (e.g. the length of time the mask will be worn, environmental conditions). There may be conditions in which consistent and appropriate mask use is challenging (e.g., very hot conditions). See Public Health Agency of Canada's guidance on [how to safely wear non-medical masks](), including replacing masks when damp or dirty, and not recommending non-medical masks for those with difficulty breathing.

- The employer must ensure that workers, volunteers, and contractors who are wearing masks or face coverings and other PPE are trained on their proper use, care and limitations and how to safely put them on and take them off.

- Masks, face coverings and PPE should be used in addition to other important public health measures, such as hand hygiene, physical distancing, reducing the number of close contacts, and screening for symptoms.

Transportation

- Optimally, workers should be transported in individual vehicles or within cohorts.

- If that is not possible, physical distancing should be maximized and non-medical masks or face covering should be worn by all in the vehicle. Depending on the weather, windows should be open.

- Additional strategies (e.g., cleaning and disinfection) identified for school bus operators may be useful, if buses are used.

Isolation spaces

- Isolation spaces are used when a case or close contact lives in a congregate setting and becomes symptomatic, tests positive for COVID-19, or is exposed to COVID-19. They are critical for ensuring that transmission of COVID-19 can be stopped. This is important because both cases and exposed contacts can be infectious and spread COVID-19.

- An isolation space is a room that allows a case or a contact to self-isolate safely and comfortably. **Optimally, every case and close contact should have their own enclosed room and dedicated washroom.** Exceptions should be made only in extraordinary circumstances, at the discretion of the local public health unit.

- Employers of an agri-food facility should anticipate the need for isolation spaces and have a plan in place for rapidly securing isolation spaces should the need arise.

- The responsibility for securing the isolation spaces primarily lies with the employer of the agri-food facility. It is also the responsibility of the employer to ensure that workers receive adequate food and other necessary supplies.

- In the instance of a large outbreak and if the employer is unable to secure enough isolation spaces, the employer may request additional support from the local public health unit. The local public health unit will work with local municipalities and the province to secure appropriate isolation spaces and personal care services.

Testing

Please check the Ministry of Health's testing resources on our website for the most up to date provincial COVID-19 testing strategy.

Case Management

- Case management decisions are made by the local public health unit, guided by the [Ministry of Health's Public Health Management of Cases and Contacts of COVID-19 in Ontario](#) and other relevant provincial guidance.

- All positive COVID-19 cases, regardless of whether they are symptomatic or asymptomatic, should be isolated immediately upon diagnosis. Similarly, any individual with symptoms of COVID-19 who is a close contact of a positive COVID-19 case should be isolated and be requested to obtain a test.

- If there is a large number of cases, positive cases can be cohorted (i.e., grouped together) in shared isolation space (see above), but the cohort should be separated at all times from all others who are not confirmed cases of COVID-19.

- Positive cases should be reassessed immediately and regularly for new or worsening symptoms of COVID-19.

- Active cases (i.e., those that may still be infectious, known as the period of communicability) should not work, regardless of symptoms, until they are resolved or cleared by the local public health unit or their health care provider.

- It is important to determine if a case lives in a congregate setting associated with the farm or in a community setting as this may impact case and contact management.

Management of a single asymptomatic case

- Periodically, a single asymptomatic positive case may be identified in a farm worker. In these instances, the local public health unit will determine the appropriate management of the case, guided by the Ministry of Health's Public Health Management of Cases and Contacts of COVID-19 in Ontario and any other relevant provincial guidance. The asymptomatic case should self-isolate as soon as possible.

- If there are no possible links to other cases or outbreaks and many other farm workers have already tested negative, repeat testing may help to determine if the case is a recent or resolved case. Employers/workplaces should consult with their local public health unit for guidance on how to manage a single case, and their close contacts. Note that even a single case in a congregate living setting (e.g., bunkhouse) could signal a possible outbreak and may lead to declaration of an outbreak, given the high risk of spread in this setting.

- If an outbreak is not suspected or declared, the local public health unit will provide guidance for managing the case's exposed close contacts.

  - Close contacts must be separated from each other as much as possible, particularly with regards to their sleeping arrangements. (See Isolation Spaces above). It may be reasonable to decrease the number of individuals living in a congregate setting, such as a bunkhouse, and place the remainder in other facilities (e.g., trailers or hotels) for the self-isolation period.

Declaring an Outbreak

- It is the role of the local public health unit to investigate and assess possible COVID-19 outbreaks in the community, and to determine when to declare an outbreak. This will involve collaboration with the affected workplace (e.g., farm), and consideration of the workplace and any associated congregate living settings.

- Once an outbreak is declared by the local public health unit, the local public health unit will direct testing and associated public health management to all those impacted. The local public health unit will provide guidance with respect to any additional measures that should be implemented to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the setting.

- Typically, one case in a congregate living area or two cases of COVID-19, either asymptomatic or symptomatic, and where there is evidence of COVID-19 transmission in either the congregate living area or the workplace could result in the declaration of an outbreak.

- Additional guidance for outbreak control measures and roles of the employer, the local public health units, MLTSD, and the Ministry of Health is available in the Ministry of Health's Workplace Outbreak Guidance and Congregate Living Settings Guidance.

Active cases who live in congregate setting (i.e. bunkhouse)

- Guidance for how to self-isolate is outlined in Public Health Management of Cases and Contacts of COVID-19 in Ontario and applies to all cases.

- Active cases are to be separated from other groups (e.g., exposed close contacts, unexposed (if any), resolved cases) in a congregate living setting, including outside.

- If private rooms are not available (or need to be prioritized for exposed close contacts), from a disease transmission perspective, COVID-19 positive cases who are in the communicable period can be cohorted together and stay in the congregate setting. This should be in a separate building with separate washroom(s) and no mixing with other groups outside of this cohort. This should only be considered if an individual's health, safety, and wellbeing can be supported in that particular building/congregate setting. In many bunkhouse settings, space and or facility limitations may be insufficient to safely and equitably support individuals with COVID-19 during isolation.

- Cohort-isolation should continue until cases are declared resolved.

- It is strongly recommended that the employer support ongoing health monitoring of these individuals to identify any immediate health or other essential needs.

- It is important to ensure that these workers do not leave these bunkhouses except for fresh air breaks with appropriate physical distancing and masking for source control.

Active cases who live in community setting (i.e. off-site)

- Self-isolation may be achievable in the community, although many workers may also live in crowded settings in the community.

- COVID-19 positive cases who are in the communicable period are to self-isolate at home, including self-isolation from family. If this is not possible, they may have to be moved to an isolation space, such as a hotel. This is done at the direction of the local public health unit.

- It is important to ensure that these workers do not leave their home and strictly follow the self-isolation requirements (except for fresh air breaks with appropriate physical distancing and masking for source control).

Resolved confirmed cases

- Resolved confirmed cases (as determined by the local public health unit or health care provider) can return to work and no longer need to self-isolate.

- Typically, an individual will be declared resolved 14 days after the onset of symptoms if symptoms are improving for 72 hours and no fever <u>OR</u> 14 days after the positive laboratory test sample collection date, assuming the individual remains afebrile and has improvement of symptoms.

Contact identification and tracing

- Contact identification and tracing decisions are made by the local public health unit, guided by the Ministry of Health's Public Health Management of Cases and Contacts of COVID-19 in Ontario and other relevant provincial guidance. This includes assessing whether a contact has had a high-risk exposure (close contact) and needs to self-isolate, or a low-risk exposure and needs to self-monitor for symptoms.

- When there are more than one or two cases of COVID-19 in an agri-food setting with congregate living, it will be difficult to determine who is a close contact of a particular case and who is not. Therefore, if in doubt, all workers who live in the same congregate living setting should be considered exposed close contacts.

- It is important to identify contacts who live in the community. Rapid identification and quarantine of these contacts will ensure that there is no sustained community transmission.

Contact management

- Contact management decisions are made by the local public health unit, guided by the Ministry of Health's Public Health Management of Cases and Contacts of COVID-19 in Ontario and other relevant provincial guidance.

- All close contacts are to be quarantined for 14 days from their last known exposure to a confirmed COVID-19 case or from their move out of an environment, facility, or setting in outbreak.

- Quarantine or self-isolation is different than cohorting. All close contacts are to be isolated (i.e., placed in their own room) as opposed to cohorted (i.e., grouped together). Cohorting will be insufficient to disrupt transmission as an exposed individual may become infectious and pass the virus to a previously unexposed individual.

Close contacts who live in congregate setting (i.e. bunkhouse)

- Self-isolation of close contacts is difficult to maintain in a congregate setting as these individuals need to stay as far apart as possible from each other; however, it is recommended that self-isolation occurs outside of the bunkhouse.

- Self-isolation continues until 14 days after each contact's last possible exposure, which is determined by the local public health unit, and typically when the contact was placed in an appropriate isolation space.

- If they develop symptoms, close contacts should be tested immediately.

Close contacts who live in community setting (i.e. off-site)

- These individuals are to be self-isolated at home, including self-isolation from anyone else who live in the same house including their family members.

- Self-isolation should continue until 14 days after the last known exposure to farm workers.

- If they develop symptoms, close contacts should be tested immediately and notify the local public health unit.

Return to Operations Following the Declaration of an Outbreak

Any return to operations should happen safely and in such a way that ongoing transmission is prevented. The principles articulated previously describing prevention strategies for COVID-19 transmission should be followed by farmers and workers.

To support continuing operations, the employer or farm agency can utilize the following workers:

- New workers with no known exposure to a COVID-19 case or outbreak.

  o New or unexposed workers should not be introduced if an outbreak is ongoing, and until all recommended outbreak and prevention measures are in place.

- Current workers who have previously tested positive for COVID-19 but have been declared resolved, no longer need to self-isolate, and are well for return to work.

Additionally, the following conditions should also be enforced:

- New workers are to be hired directly by the employer and are not contract workers from another agency.

- Strict cohort measures should be in place to minimize the number of workers per cohort. A cohort should not exceed more than 15 people.

- A list of workers is to be maintained, so that if there is a positive case, contact tracing can readily occur.