

NORTHWEST HORTICULTURAL COUNCIL

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To: Pacific Northwest Tree Fruit Firms

From: Northwest Horticultural Council

Date: May 12, 2020

RE: COVID-19 Workforce Concerns

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues and testing is scaled up, officials anticipate that communities and businesses will continue to see increases in the number of people testing positive for the disease. No sector of our economy is exempt from this, so, unfortunately, we will likely continue to see employees working in tree fruit orchards and packinghouses test positive too. This may heighten the anxiety of the rest of the workforce and/or lead to enhanced scrutiny from the media and activist groups. Below are some key points to consider as tree fruit firms navigate the current environment. Updates will be provided as more information becomes available.

Communication of Prevention Efforts: Orchardists and packinghouse operators are implementing a number of changes to protect their workforce. It is suggested that farms and packinghouses keep track of protective measures they have taken. These are dependent on the individual orchard or packinghouse, but may include:

- Implementing protocols based on available guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) – as well as state and local public health, agricultural, and employment safety agencies. This includes public health advice for social distancing, personal and facility hygiene, face coverings and more.
- Encouraging workers to follow the same guidelines recommended for everyone when leaving their homes to shop or conduct other business.
- Using educational videos and materials in English and Spanish to educate workers about proper sanitation and health care practices.
- Implementing guidelines for workplace and housing standards, including adoption of practices to limit interactions between crews and teams within both farms and packinghouses.
- Providing workers advice on in-home sanitation, social distancing, and recuperative services.
- (As currently available in Yakima county) Where available, inviting county health officials into packinghouses to evaluate workplace protocols to ensure that employees are being adequately protected.

It is also beneficial to incorporate practices already in place prior to the pandemic, such as strict sick worker and handwashing policies, that both protect workers and preserve food safety.

While it seems obvious that growers and packers are committed to the safety of their workers, it can be beneficial in these uncertain times to proactively communicate that to the workers who are anxious about the spread of COVID-19. A compilation of protective measures taken in the orchard or packinghouse may be useful to that end, as well as in communicating with other interested audiences such as employees, customers, activist groups, or the media.

Available Support: The NHC consulted with both our crisis communications consultant and legal counsel in developing this memo, and worked closely with the Washington State Tree Fruit Association (WSTFA) in its development. We have also developed talking points that can be used for media inquiries or employee communications. Please contact Kate Tynan or Mark Powers should you be interested in assistance on either of these items, or if you wish to direct media calls to industry trade associations (WSTFA or NHC).