

Farms, Food and You Podcast

Farmworker Health and COVID-19

[MUSIC]

Farmworkers are essential to our lives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, their work hasn't stopped.

What risks have these essential workers faced as they've worked to produce the food that'll end up on our plates in coming weeks and months? And what are NC State Extension, its partners and other state agencies doing to help protect them?

These are the questions we'll explore in this episode of Farms, Food and You, a podcast from North Carolina State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

I'm Dee Shore, and in this episode, we'll hear from a number of people with direct ties to farming and to ensuring agricultural health and safety in North Carolina.

They tell us that COVID-19 has added new complications to longstanding concerns for farmworker safety. They describe what multiple agencies and organizations are doing to make sure everyone involved not only understands the risks but also acts on them. And they tell us why these different efforts are critically important to ensuring a strong food supply for our state.

[MUSIC]

Pedro Zuñiga Martinez is among thousands of farmworkers who were gearing up for the spring growing season in North Carolina at about the same time COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. Our telephone connection was poor, but it was clear that the virus made him nervous.

[ZUÑIGA]

"Really, we can't do too much, because we no got medicine for this kind of things – only what this guy's talking: the keeping your hands clean, wash your hands. Really we don't got any choice right now. But what we try to do (is) keeping the distance from everybody.

"These things is not a game. These things is serious stuff. This is what I think can be big, big trouble everywhere."

Serious safety concerns aren't new to agriculture. Long before COVID-19 came into play, the National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety had ranked agriculture as one of the nation's most hazardous industries, given its high rate of both fatal and nonfatal injuries.

COVID-19 upped the risks. At the same time we were being told to keep our physical distance from others, farmworkers were arriving in North Carolina to produce and pack fruits, vegetables and other crops. Their jobs don't always lend themselves to social distancing.

This put them in a vulnerable position. Beth Rodman, bureau chief of agricultural health and safety for the North Carolina Department of Labor, put it this way:

[RODMAN]

“I think farmworkers, based on their working and living conditions, are at a greater risk of spreading or contracting the virus. Farmworkers typically live in migrant camps that have shared kitchen and bathroom facilities. There are often multiple people sleeping in each room, which makes it difficult for workers to maintain a distance of six feet, especially in the larger camps that have a greater number of workers. Farmworkers are also typically transported to the work site in vans and/or buses, where they sit closely together. Or workers may be sitting next to each other on a transplanter.

“It is recommended that all employers, including farmers, provide masks and other personal protective equipment for employees. Masks are especially important for employees who are unable to practice social distancing while working and during transport for farmworkers. Depending on the farming operation, it may be possible for workers to maintain that distance while in the fields.

“Other farmers, depending on the crop will have to provide masks to protect the workers. I talked to some employers who own packing operations, and they are implementing additional safeguards, such as installing plexiglass partitions on the packing line to protect their workers.”

Those we spoke with say that such efforts to lower COVID-19 risks are important to farmworkers and their families and also to farmers, rural communities and the state as a whole.

Blake Brown, an NC State agricultural economist, is one of them. He says that the H-2A guest visa program, which allows foreign workers to come to the United States for seasonal agricultural work, is particularly important for farmers, consumers and the workers themselves. Losing that program would have significant consequences.

[BROWN]

“We would have to import more and more from Mexico and South America, and then those workers that did come here would have to stay in Mexico and work for much lower wages to produce the food that would be exported from Mexico to the United States.

“Basically, it would shift us towards importing more fresh produce than we already do, and we already import a lot. And the prices would go up.

“It would be a real downer for farmers here and consumers as well as those H-2A workers, because they can probably make here in one hour what they can make in about two days in Mexico.”

Brown says that hundreds of thousands of workers come through the H-2A program each year to plant, tend, pick, and pack fruits, vegetables and other crops in the United States. North Carolina is one of their leading destinations. An estimated 30 percent of the state’s agricultural employers rely on foreign

workers. One reason is the prevalence of specialty crops that could be bruised or destroyed by machines.

[BROWN]

The main needs for labor in our state for seasonal labor are fresh produce and sweet potatoes and the Christmas trees. Sweet potatoes that are sold for the fresh market have to be hand harvested. So they dig them, and then they have to be gathered by hand because the machine actually bruises the potato, and they won't keep for the fresh market.

Tobacco can be mechanically harvested or hand-harvested, and so where we see the biggest use of labor in tobacco is where those farms are also growing some sort of fresh produce or sweet potatoes, and they have the labor there for the sweet potatoes and the fresh produce so they will sometimes go ahead and hand-harvest the tobacco.

Local labor is extremely hard to come by.

[BROWN]

"People that want to work that hard are generally employed full-time, and they don't want a seasonal job, they want a year-round job. These farmers have to advertise these jobs at their local employment service agency. And sometimes they'll get local workers, but they don't usually stay very long. But there aren't many local workers that are interested."

On the other hand, Brown says, H-2A workers are interested in seasonal work. These jobs give them an opportunity to work here for several months and to send money back to their families.

NC State Extension Latino Programs Manager Cintia Aguilar hesitates when it comes to making sweeping statements about farmworkers, but she says the vast majority have a strong desire to work – and that can have implications for health and safety.

[AGUILAR]

"If you ask any farmworker, their priority here is to work. If a worker doesn't feel well, he still will go to work. And they're afraid also that if they don't go to work, maybe they're going to be fired. Of those who are H-2A workers, if they're not healthy, maybe next year they're not going to be invited to come.

"This is not the right way to say, but it's nothing wrong with that, in the sense that that's their culture. That's part of the culture of farmworkers."

Another complicating factor is the short supply of personal protective equipment. Farmworkers need such equipment not only because of COVID-19 but also to meet U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regulations related to pesticide application.

Robin Tutor-Marcom is director of the North Carolina Agromedicine Institute, a partnership of East Carolina, NC State and North Carolina A&T State universities. She says that helping growers find personal protective equipment and related materials for both purposes has been daunting.

[TUTOR-MARCOM]

“The reason we could not get them was because all of the personal protective equipment was stockpiled or diverted to health care providers and first responders. And we understand why, but that does not negate the fact we still have a food supply to produce, and that our farms who must use chemicals to ensure that they can produce at the rate they do – those things didn’t go away.”

After months of work, the Agromedicine Institute has been able to secure supplies such as gloves, Tyvek suits, and masks and face coverings, as well as donations and grant funding for additional supplies.

Meanwhile, NC State Extension’s Farmworker Health and Safety Education Program has been working with other organizations to secure masks for farmworkers. At the same time, the program is creating stronger connections among the groups so that future crisis response is easier than it has been with COVID-19.

Cintia Aguilar and Susan Jakes started the program six years ago with a grant from the tobacco and cigarette manufacturing company Philip Morris.

Jakes – Extension’s associate state program leader for community and rural development – describes the program’s purpose:

[JAKES]

“I think a lot of what we try to do in our program is to create a culture of safety – getting workers to understand the health and safety and to really understand their own risk and then also to create a culture of safety that will support them being healthy and safe on the farm.”

At a time when farmworkers needed *more* information about how to keep themselves and their communities safe from COVID-19, stay-at-home orders put a stop to the program’s in-person health and safety training.

So the program switched gears. Back in March, health and safety educator Roberto Rosales helped produce three Spanish-language videos presenting basic information on the virus.

[ROSALES]

“One was, ‘What is Coronavirus?’ and its symptoms. The second one was how it spreads ... if you know what it is, and you know how it spreads, then that can slow that down. We wanted to provide a third video where it was more geared towards the farmworkers. The main thing was thinking about what things can protect workers when they’re not on the farm and thinking, you know, when they’re in that group housing, you have 30, 40 workers, we need to think about high-contact surfaces, door knobs. ... just trying to apply some of that knowledge more geared for the farmworkers.”

The videos helped farmworkers understand more about what they could do to keep themselves and their communities safe, but more personal protective equipment and materials are urgently needed, Rosales says.

[ROSALES]

“We’re working with another campaign, Masks4Farmworkers of NC. It’s a national campaign, but there was a group together that approached us in trying to provide masks also to farmworkers. And that was a collaboration with a lot of agencies from the Mexican Consulate, Guatemalan Consulate, educational institutions. The way we’ve decided to do that approach was to really contact agencies or organizations that provide services already to farmworkers. So these are health centers or any religions. So in this case, we work with one that’s called Episcopal Farmworker Ministry out in Sampson County, and they do a lot of donations, not just masks, but cleaning supplies, food distribution.”

Building such interconnectivity is key, says Tutor-Marcom. And she believes elected officials and the public should know about it.

[TUTOR-MARCOM]

“The ability to work along the continuum to meet the needs of the people that we’re here to serve – that’s my message to elected officials. And to anyone who’s in a state or federal agency, we have to get out of our silos, and we have to be willing to not be afraid to work outside the norm.”

Every week, a small group meets to identify and address issues related to North Carolina farmworkers and COVID-19. Tutor-Marcom, Rodman and representatives of the state’s department of Health and Human Services and the North Carolina Community Health Center Association, are among them.

[TUTOR-MARCOM]

“Whatever gaps they had in serving farmworkers before. I don’t believe those exist today. I’m sure we still have gaps, but they don’t exist the way they did before this started.”

Identifying and addressing risks before they become problems is important to Shane Varnell. He’s a farmer in Edgecombe County. Without access to H-2A workers, he says he would be forced out of business.

[VARNELL]

“It would be, you’re not going to farm. I would not even put my crops in the ground. If I knew for a fact I could not have the labor force or they got sick or couldn’t cross the borders, I would not even put my crop in the ground this year.”

Varnell is concerned not just about his business but also about his workers. He stresses that he wants everyone to stay healthy, and he's been taking steps to ensure that's the case. He provides handwashing stations and antibacterial wipes, insists that those who use vehicles thoroughly wipe them down, and tells workers to let him know if they feel bad.

[VARNELL]

"It is absolutely tremendously important to me. If one of them were to get sick, they would pretty much spark up like a nursing home or a hospital. They live in close quarters, so if one of them were to get sick, pretty much all of them would. It's very vital to me to keep my workers safe."

Neyre Barajas, of EB Harvesting, shares a similar sentiment. She and her family have worked in agriculture for years, and now, as a farm labor contractor, she recruits and hires H-2A farmworkers for growers in Florida, North Carolina and New Jersey.

[BARAJAS]

"We've done this agriculture for almost 18 years, and we have employees that have been with us ever since then. And so for us, every single one is like a family. You got to treat them correct, right?, in order for your business to continue working.

"Safety is the number one important thing for us. We want everyone to work in a safe environment.

"And we want everybody to go home to their families once the season is over."

[MUSIC]

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[MUSIC]