

Notes from April 21, 2020: Covid-19 Resources for Wild Blueberry Growers

AGENDA

Introductions: Eric Venturini, Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine

1. University Update: Lily Calderwood, UMaine Extension Wild Blueberry Specialist
2. DACF Update: Nancy McBrady, State of Maine DACF
3. DOL Update: Jorge Acero, Maine Department of Labor (Migrant Labor Recommendations)
4. US DOL New Law: Steven McKinney, US Department of Labor (Labor Laws and Covid-19)
5. Legislative Update: Cameron O'Brien, Senator Collins Office
6. Adjustments to FSA Loans: Dave Lavway, Farm Service Agency

1. Research & Education, Dr. Lily Calderwood

Non-essential Research on hold and Extension offices are physically closed until May 17th, 2020.

We are still open & here to work for you! We can and are still doing the following:

On-farm visits

Phone calls, Online, Website

Coffee hour every Friday from 8:00-9:00 am (Events Page:

<https://extension.umaine.edu/blueberries/events/category/calendar-of-events/>)

Lily: (207) 812-2915 or lily.calderwood@maine.edu

Pesticide Credits:

2 webinars being created

BPC is providing limited exams for new applicators: pesticides@maine.gov

BPC does have online course options for credits if you need them ASAP:

https://www.maine.gov/dacf/php/pesticides/credit_calendar.shtml

Use the Extension Covid Resource Webpages!

<https://extension.umaine.edu/serving-maine/>

<https://extension.umaine.edu/beginning-farmer-resource-network/covid-19/>

2. Department of Agricultural Conservation and Forestry, Nancy McBrady

Immediate focus:

- Providing information and resources on the health, safety and regulations on operations
- Details on essential operations (who is essential?)
- Still conducting core inspections and testing of commodities (meat, dairy, etc.)

Critical infrastructure: Agriculture

- This includes essential Ag-related business: Travel (even in & out of the state), Hospitality (for travel).
- Agricultural workers coming to Maine (such as beekeepers) are allowed to stay at motels, hotels in Maine.

Utilize the DACF website!

<https://www.maine.gov/dacf/covid19/>

\$19B in Agricultural support by USDA for: Livestock, dairy, row crops and specialty crops.

Large effort by the USDA to purchase emergency food and aid in the distribution of these commodities. Sounds like this money will be managed through FSA.

Congress is working to replenish the PPP by \$450B → stay tuned for this and utilize it. Just because the first round of PPP was spent, does not mean you shouldn't apply. Get your paperwork in so that you're in line for the next round.

What does this new reality mean for farmers and growers in the state?

We've seen a rapid shift away from the 'norm'. (the norm being wholesale and fast food supply.)

This exposed our dependence on these systems and lack of preparedness.

But this also raises opportunities for local farms and producers.

Still do your fresh pack and distribute your products; BUT take necessary precautions with State Guidelines.

"Real Maine" – launching a website soon to aid in connections, sales and distributions.

Agricultural Development Grants – these will be going out soon.

Also – funding for **Technical Grants**, these are smaller, but can aid in changes needed for marketing and distribution.

Ag Labor Concerns – working with USDA, Homeland Security, etc. to foresee transportation logistics, prevent bottlenecks and keep everyone safe and healthy.

DOL recommendations for worker housing, transportation and healthcare

Look toward your season through the lens of COVID-19. Plan for sanitation, travel and PPE of workers.

3. Maine Department of Labor, Jorge Acero

I will go over RECOMMENDATIONS (not law) around how to handle agricultural workers and sick employees. These are guidelines that we strongly encourage you to follow.

Look to the Maine Department of Labor for recommendations for workers here:

<https://www.maine.gov/dacf/covid19/docs/dol-guidance-agricultural-employers-healthy-farming-season.pdf>

An outbreak during harvest could be devastating.

Safe-guard your family, your farm, your workers and your community.

Sanitations (handwashing):

Hot water not required in the field

Hot water is required in living quarters.

"friction, soap & water for a minimum of 20 seconds."

Housing:

Housing and works sites must have hand washing supplies (hot soap and water).

Beds for farmworkers should allow 6-foot spacing

Transportation:

Assigning seats so each worker uses the same seat

Community space – well ventilated
Proper sanitation within buses and vehicles

Worksite Distancing:

Bathroom and sanitizing stations
Work should be conducted to allow physical distancing of 6'
If workers are closer than 6' masks should be considered

If Workers Become Sick:

They are protected by Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA or Act)
They need to be able to convey their symptoms to someone in their language.
They need to be in separate living quarters, with exposed individuals separate from both those who have been diagnosed and those who are healthy.

Harvest begins in July. Start ordering masks, gloves, and sanitizer NOW. It is your responsibility to buy PPE and make masks if needed. Many of these items are in short supply or have delayed delivery. If you can put in an order now, materials might be here in July-August when you need them.

3. US Department of Labor, Steven McKinney

This information IS the Law.

Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA or Act) – Started 4.01.2020

This [POSTER](#) must be posted at your site until the end of the year (December 31, 2020). The poster is available in several languages [here](#).

As the poster states, if a worker comes to you and they can't work due to COVID-19, here is the law:

Two provisions under this law:

Paid sick leave act: provides 2 weeks of paid sick leave (up to 80 hours) – if qualifying for reasons #1-3 the employee must receive 100% paid leave.

1. Your employee has been ordered by the government (state or federal) to quarantine or isolate.
2. Your employee has been advised by a health care provider to quarantine or isolate.
3. Your employee is experiencing symptoms and seeking medical diagnosis.

Expanded family and medical leave: if a family member or child gets sick, reasons #5-6 they get 2/3rds pay.

1. Your employee is caring for an individual subject to an order described in #1 or #2.
2. Caring for his or her child whose school or place of care is closed due to COVID-19.
3. Don't worry about this yet – there may be situations that evolve, these will be specified by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

If you're in the private or public sector with 500 or less employees.

You pay the employee – and get reimbursed (IRS website has info on how to submit this)
Small business exemptions: only for childcare issues, but you have to prove this would jeopardize your business.

There is no waiting period – employees qualify for this upon hire.

Posters need to be printed (in appropriate languages) and posted around the workplace. The poster is required because workers need to be notified about their rights.

4. Senator Collins Office, Cameron O'Brien

Senators Collins Office has been pushing for support for specialty crops that have already faces challenges – in the form of the USDA purchasing fresh and processed specialty crops for redistribution.

The office has also been pushing for direct support to growers.

Direct support to growers: USDA will provide \$16 billion in direct support based on actual losses for agricultural producers.

- Measuring losses on Jan. 2020- April 15, 2020 timeframe.
- Prioritizing product in storage/surplus from 2019 and early 2020 that could not be marketed.
- Capping payments to growers at \$125,000 per commodity and up to \$250,000 per grower.
- Currently working through rulemaking and expect to start accepting applications in May.

USDA Purchase and Distribution:

- USDA will be purchasing and distributing these products.

5. Farm Service Agency, David Lavway and Jennifer Ranke

farmers.gov/service-center-locator

FSA is relaxing the loan-making process. This includes:

- Extending the deadline for applicants to complete farm loan applications;
- Making exceptions when FSA is unable to obtain lien searches, filings, and recordings because of closed government buildings;
- Extending the repayment period of annual operating loans;
- Use of video conferencing to facilitate loan closings;
- Allowing lenders to extend credit prior to applying for a guarantee.
- Extending deadlines for producers to respond to servicing actions;
- Temporarily suspending loan accelerations and foreclosures;
- Allowing guarantee lenders to consider deferrals when borrowers do not have a feasible plan.

6. Q & A

Sign up for the Wild Blueberry Commission's new *Wild Blue Weekly* email for timely information relevant to your businesses. Sign up by emailing England@maine.edu.

How do we find PPE? – OSHA has some guidance on what to do if you can't find supplies.

- People have also had success ordering online.
- Order items now – it may be delayed, but it's worth submitting.

Fresh pack line – is hard to distance workers 6' apart. – Greater testing may help in operating safely.

- **Follow the Maine CDC website closely.**
- Reduce the work force (it's not ideal, but it may need to happen).
- It's all about planning ahead.
- Meat packers are putting flex plastic between workers. Plastic hanging like going into freezers.
- Homemade face masks or plastic face shields

Do workers coming in need to be quarantined? Yes – anyone coming in from out of state at the moment needs to quarantine for 14 days. Once the isolations finish, the workers can begin. This is currently happening in Aroostook Cty.

- **Contact workers ahead of time, make sure they are aware of how to stay safe.**
- They must understand the importance of quarantine and how to do so safely.
- ***These are recommendations, not laws***
- This is for your safety, your farm and your community.

How will we function this year?!

Packing facilities:

- How many people can you safely have in each farm building or processing room?
- How could you alter the location of entry and exit doors to have workers enter on one side, do their work, and exit through the other side?
- Can you put tape down on the floor indicating where to stand for each task?

Transportation:

- How do you transport migrant workers from home base to field and back? The CDC recommends that if people cannot keep 6' apart, masks should be worn. Homemade masks are fine. Here are [mask pattern](#) options.
- Can there be one migrant worker who goes to do grocery shopping for a group of migrant workers?

Farm stands: Many farms are packing bags/boxes of produce ahead of time for consumers to do curbside pick-up at a specific time. Be aware that you may have more demand than usual. This is a good opportunity to sell more berries. Where else could you sell them? Is there a vegetable farm near by that you could sell berries to in order to get them out to more customers?

Farmers markets: If you sell berries at a market, many changes have occurred. While these practices might be relaxed by August, it's still good to know what to expect. Market vendors are taking order ahead of time over the phone and packing bags ahead of time for easy pick up. Consumers are buying more local produce! Some orders have been \$100+ making it difficult to pack such a large volume quickly. Some farms are running out of produce. If this starts to happen to you, would you consider limiting the number of pints per person?

Consumer education: The farmers market and farm stand experiences will not be the same as usual. There are two types of customers:

1. Risk Averse: Consumers who will want to know that your produce was handled safely, that your workers are safe, and that they can pick up produce safely.
2. Clueless: Other customers will not follow your request to stay 6' apart etc. How will you handle this situation?