

“Essential workers:” Appreciated now but will today’s recognition be reflected in long-term remuneration and policy?

While we concur with those who think that the coronavirus pandemic’s peak has yet to occur and setting an end date for its major impact on human health is an exercise in uncertainty, we do think it is an appropriate time to begin to think about what life will be like in the AC (after coronavirus) era.

A couple of weeks ago (<https://tinyurl.com/ybtgfan0>) we began to raise issues about the potential impact of the coronavirus on the funding for and design of the next farm bill.

This week we want to continue the discussion by examining what the AC era will look like for essential workers in the agricultural sector including those who work in the processing and retail distribution sectors. Once the pandemic has passed will things go back to the way they were before COVID-19 took the US well past the 100,000 level in pandemic-related deaths or will people demand a reordering of life to make it more resilient to health/environmental events like the coronavirus and global warming?

As we look at the issue of essential workers, we hypothesize that they fall into two groups. The largest group are low-wage workers in the food processing industry, most notably meat packing), the retail food distribution industry, and the health care system. A smaller group includes professionals in public safety and health care and earns substantially more than individuals in the first group.

In the midst of the pandemic both sets of workers have been labeled not only as essential workers, they have been told that they are heroes who are risking their lives on a daily basis to provide a set of essential services to the rest of society. Many of them have been paid bonuses in recognition of the risks they take on a daily basis. In the packing industry, plants have been ordered to reopen and workers have been ordered to show up for their shift.

Our focus in this column is on the workers in the packing industry though many of the issues will affect the others as well. If there was ever a question about whether workers in meat packing plants are agricultural workers or not, the answer is no longer in doubt. They are. Ask any rancher or hog producer who is holding animals longer than they want because, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the packing plants cannot handle the normal flow of meat animals coming into the system.

It is no secret that a significant number of workers in the packing industry are undocumented and without them the plants would have had to close or pay significantly higher wages. Right now, the immigration raids on these plants seem to have stopped. When the pandemic is over will we thankfully recognize those who have lost relatives and risked their lives to put food on our tables with a path to citizenship? Will we believe that they have earned their right to become a US citizen or will we allow the immigration raids and anti-immigrant policies to return with a vengeance?

Will the companies redesign their plant workflow to become more humane and resilient? Will they pay the workers a wage that will allow them to live a middle class lifestyle or will they pay the absolute minimum they can get by with? Will we support regulations that ensure the health and safety of these agricultural workers?

Might we see the major packers forced to follow the German labor model and establish worker-management councils where workers have a significant voice in wages and working conditions or will it remain the purview of the federal government to set minimal labor standards?

After having risked their health and their lives will these workers have access to affordable health care coverage for themselves and their families?

On that point, we have to remember that many farm families also have difficulty finding affordable health insurance policies that do not have sky high deductibles and premiums. How many farm families have lost health care coverage because the spouse who works in town was furloughed during the pandemic with the resulting loss of health insurance?

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted weaknesses in our social and economic life. How will we respond when it is over?

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