

COVID-19 challenges key elements of the food supply chain

In the middle of April, with policy makers debating whether or not to ease some of the stay-at-home rules that were imposed as a result of the rapid spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19), the state of agriculture is a study in contrasts with chicken cuts and ground beef in short supply while yellow squash and zucchini are being left in the field and milk is being dumped in some areas.

At the heart of the challenges facing various parts of the food supply chain is 1) the change in where people are eating, 2) the availability of workers to harvest fruit and vegetable crops and work in processing plants, and 3) outbreaks of COVID-19 among workers in some processing plants. Taken one at a time, each of these is manageable. When they all hit at the same time, we have a perfect storm.

With the spread of COVID-19, schools and colleges have closed sending students home; governors have issued sheltering-in-place orders that have closed restaurants; and many businesses have their staff working from home. With more people eating at home, more food is being consumed at home and less in restaurants and institutional settings like school and business cafeterias.

This shift has significant consequences for the food supply chain because most food consumed at home is sold in individual or family sized servings which are required to have nutrition labels on each package. Institutional cafeterias purchase their foods in much larger packages that are not required to have nutrition labels.

While we have a significant amount of product in the food supply chain, it is not easy to move the food in the institutional food supply chain into the home food supply chain. Most families do not own refrigerators and freezers capable of holding the large packages of various fruits, vegetables, and meats that are typically purchased by restaurants and cafeterias. The same is true of canned goods.

In the short run, we are experiencing some problems as the food supply chain adjusts to the demands of a sheltering-in-place population. Over the longer run, it remains to be seen how quickly the supply chain will be able to readjust when restaurants and cafeterias reopen. A further complication may come if we have a relaxation and retightening of social distancing and travel rules if we see a second or third peak in COVID-19 cases and deaths.

Many of the farms that grow the fruits and vegetables we eat in the US are harvested by immigrants and temporary workers who are skilled in harvesting those crops. In the past, many have received temporary visas that allow them to enter the country and harvest the fresh crops we eat. Given the sheltering-in-place and social distancing requirements and the limitations on travel, what kind of system do we need to ensure the health and safety of both temporary workers and permanent residents of the US? The longer it takes to sort out these issues, the greater the challenges that will be faced by the farmers who grow these crops.

We have already seen some deaths in meat processing plants, making clear the need to adjust the production system in a way that keeps both workers and consumers safe. Many production floors have use systems that have workers standing shoulder to shoulder with each other. From our perspective it will take a continuous collaborative process that involves both workers and company officials to make adjustments to the production systems that protect all involved and provide consumers with the meats and other food products they want.

As we tackle these issues, we need to work on meeting the needs of the food insecure population in the US as well as those who become food insecure as the result of school closures or being laid off as the result of the policies instituted to reduce the spread of the coronavirus. It will likely take a combination of SNAP benefits (food stamps), food pantries, and food delivery systems to protect at-risk persons who shouldn't leave the safety of their homes.

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