



Cooperating on Corona

Packers and worker members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union on the prairies appear to be operating cooperatively and with mutual respect as they seek to deal with the impact of the virus. Workers note that the companies are going above and beyond on safety, accommodation and compensation. Companies “stepping up to the plate” has been widely noted.

Both workers and the companies are dealing with the issue by staggering work times, work processes and breaks. Breaks are occurring in a variety of different locations. Times between shifts are lengthened to minimize contact. Packers are moving locker rooms and putting up heated tents. Workers that have returned from foreign destinations have been paid while in isolation. The employees and companies are collaborating to devise different ways and time patterns to get the hogs and pork processed. Companies are showing flexibility on vacations and time off. Employees are being called individually and told to stay home if any symptoms. Packers are being creative in topping up wages for those that end up off work for any number of reasons.

Employees Step Up

For their part, worker absenteeism is down significantly. People, of course, are concerned, but for the most part workers have come together. Workers in the plants, warehouses and stores are themselves stepping up to the plate while everyone else is told to stay home. The same is true of the Canadian Food and Inspection Agency (CFIA) and other inspectors. Their vital work is also to be acknowledged.

Of course, that is critical on both the live side and the pork side. On the live side, any disruption would be exceptionally bad for hog farmers. In fact, hog farmers will bear almost all the financial brunt of any harvest disruption. Given hog numbers, that would hit hard and quick. There would also be animal welfare problems that would quickly develop. On the pork side, word of plant stoppages would make consumers panic more than has already been the case.

During this time, the need for overtime is going to be greater than ever because companies are being creative on keeping workers separated. That often means greater time between shifts or elongating shifts. Ironically, the overtime could play a big roll in keeping everyone safer, let alone keeping hogs moving. That is why it is essential that CFIA allow overtime to continue.

Kevin Grier, March 2020

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