

Vaccinations: ‘This community is often mobile and based in rural communities’

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“We also understand that some workers are concerned about whether vaccinations will impact their immigration status or public charge,” Owens added, “so we try to work through our trusted community partners.”

Washington

In Washington, farmworker vaccination kicked off March 17.

Washington does not track vaccinations by occupation, so officials say they don’t have data on how many farmworkers have been vaccinated so far.

Katie Pope, spokeswoman for the Washington State Department of Health, said the state is reaching farmworkers through “mass vaccination sites, mobile clinics, employer-based clinics, pharmacies and health care providers.”

During the pandemic, Pope said, the state has contracted with Medical Teams International and other groups to deliver testing to agricultural worksites, and Pope said “we are exploring a similar program for vaccinations.”

Employers can find out how to get workers vaccinated by calling

1-800-525-0127.

California

California farmworkers became eligible for vaccination Feb. 13.

Sami Gallegos, spokeswoman for the California Department of Public Health, said the state is primarily using mobile clinics “to reach farmworkers where they work and live.”

The state, she said, is partnering with farmworker advocacy groups, counties, community and faith-based organizations and employers.

Like Washington, California does not track vaccinations by occupation and

therefore isn’t tracking how quickly farmworkers are getting vaccinated.

Employers should contact their local health jurisdiction to request a mobile clinic.

Idaho

The vaccine rollout in Idaho is a bit different, given the makeup of the state’s Department of Health and Welfare.

Idaho public health is divided into seven autonomous districts that are each responsible for managing vaccinations in their own areas. Districts are based in Hayden, Lewiston, Caldwell, Boise, Twin Falls,

Pocatello and Idaho Falls.

Niki Forbing-Orr, spokeswoman for IDHW, said vaccinations are available for frontline essential workers, including food and agriculture workers. Anyone 16 and older will be eligible for the vaccine beginning April 5.

Christine Myron, spokeswoman for the agency’s Central District — which covers Boise, Ada, Elmore and Valley counties — said they are working with enrolled vaccine providers to reach farmworkers, such as the Desert Sage Health Center in Mountain Home.

“They are scheduling

on-site clinics and doing so at hours of the day that are accommodating of shift work and schedules,” Myron said.

Myron said the district is not offering mass vaccination events but continues to take a decentralized approach to reaching farmworkers directly in their communities.

The district’s vaccine task force meets each Thursday to discuss how they will allocate vaccines for the upcoming week, she said.

“We take the needs of our providers into consideration as we determine how best to allocate specific vaccine types and volumes to which providers,” Myron said.

Pandemic: ‘Cleaning, disinfectants, masks, you name it — it got really expensive’

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Small farm

Aaron Nichols, co-owner of Stoneboat Farm in Hillsboro, Ore.

Pre-pandemic, restaurants made up about 57% of sales for Stoneboat Farm, a small vegetable and turkey farm in Hillsboro.

Then COVID-19 struck. “Those first couple of weeks, we were really nervous because we knew restaurants were closing,” said Aaron Nichols, 37.

His team opted to expand the farm’s Community Supported Agriculture program, or CSA.

It wasn’t easy. Because of the home gardening boom, seeds were hard to come by. The farm planted what it could, then purchased supplementary vegetables from other farms.

The model was a triumph. In 2019, the farm had sold 150 CSA shares. In 2020, that leaped to 350 shares. This year, Nichols predicts he’ll sell 425 shares.

“People wanted to be part of this, to eat local,” he said. “It felt and still feels like a community of people who care about each other, care about us.”

Stoneboat Farm also saw a \$10,000 increase in sales at farmers markets during 2020.

Because the farm had numerous pandemic-related expenses, Nichols said 2020’s bottom line was slightly worse than 2019’s.

But overall, he said, he’s excited about direct-to-consumer market growth.

Tree fruit

Jesus Limon, owner of J&M Orchards Inc. in Wenatchee and Quincy, Wash.

The main impact of coronavirus hit home at Jesus Limon’s farm at the worst possible time last year: harvest.

Limon, 63, owns a small orchard company with about 130 acres of apples and cherries across Wenatchee and Quincy.

For months, Limon said, he had done everything he could to prevent an outbreak: requiring masks, spacing out H-2A workers, putting up barriers between bunk beds, installing sanitation stations.

“Cleaning, disinfectants, masks, you name it — it got really expensive,” he said. “I don’t think hardly anybody’s making money right now farming. It seems all the rules from all the agencies keep squeezing us.”

Late summer, several workers in one housing unit tested positive for COVID-19. Limon worked with the local health department and paid the workers to quarantine for two weeks.

Fortunately, workers outside that unit didn’t catch the virus and kept picking, but because several were quarantined, Limon left nearly 500 bins of apples on his trees.

“What do you do?” he said. “Everybody’s facing it.”

Despite challenges, Limon said he’s hopeful he’ll soon be able to get his workers vaccinated.

Agritourism

Hilary Jensen, owner of The Patch in Ellensburg, Wash.

The pandemic unleashed a surprisingly good season for Central Washington agritourism operator Hilary Jensen.

Shortly before the fall fun



Capital Press File
Kevin Jones



Washington Grain Commission
Mike Carstensen



Idaho Potato Commission
Nick Blanksma



Capital Press File
Willie Bokma



Baker & Murakami
Paul Skeen



Facebook
Hilary Jensen



Jesus Limon
Jesus Limon



Aaron Nichols/Stoneboat Farm
Aaron Nichols



Courtesy of Hector Lopez
Julio Gutierrez, left, worked during the early days of the pandemic harvesting asparagus at Larsen Farms in Pasco, Wash., under the supervision of his crew boss, Hector Lopez.

was to begin, the governor’s office came down with strict rules. The state’s agritourism industry mobilized and convinced the governor’s office to relax the rules.

As a result, most activities were allowed — with masks, hand sanitizer and social distancing. Jensen, who operates The Patch in Ellensburg, said attendance increased.

“People were so hungry for something normal,” she said. “The gratitude from the guests was palatable. They were so grateful to have that slice of normalcy.”

Revenue went up, but so did expenses. Gloves that normally cost \$5 a box were going for \$60. The season’s profitability was saved by a \$5,000 grant from federal relief funds to buy personal protection equipment.

“We were prepared for the worst, but for the most part it was all for the best,” Jensen said. “I really do think it was a good year. We were just as grateful as our guests.”

“We didn’t have a single case of COVID traced to us,” she said. “We did it before, so we should be allowed to do it again.”

Potatoes**Nick Blanksma, a farmer near Hammett, Idaho**

Nick Blanksma and his partners were planting potatoes for processing when COVID-19 shutdowns slammed the market.

They stuck to their acreage target.

“It’s very hard when you have already put so much time, money and effort into the upcoming crop to change course,” said Blanksma. “There was no going back, with seed on hand and potatoes in the ground.”

Demand shifted from food-service to retail and food banks as many people worked from home or were laid off. Potatoes grown for one purpose served another. Federal relief plans emerged. Restaurants expanded take-out service. Some processors bought more potatoes after first cutting their contracted acreage.

“There was so much going on, and it was so crazy,” Blanksma said. “We were out of the loop as far as how the product got to its final destination. Fortunately, our (processor) customer was able to work through the logistical problems and take all of our finished product.”

“We are a tough industry,” Blanksma said. “We will come

out of this, but it will be turbulent for at least two years.”

Onions**Paul Skeen, a farmer near Nyssa, Ore.**

Paul Skeen said that by the end of March 2020, planting in the large southeastern Oregon-southwestern Idaho growing region was wrapping up — just as processors were reducing their contracted acreage.

Some farmers produced fewer onions. Some processors bought more as 2020 unfolded. “When it hit, it just shut the large onion down,” Skeen said of the pandemic.

The region is known for growing big onions, and their main customers, foodservice outlets, slashed demand.

Skeen said a Payroll Protection Program loan was “a life-saver in keeping my employees employed all winter.”

At the same time, transportation “has been a problem throughout the West, he said. Warmer weather may bring more types of trucks, such as flatbeds, into the mix.

Though onion prices increased, so did production costs.

“I’m an old man; I’ll make it,” said Skeen, 67. “There’s a lot of young kids who need better prices to stay afloat.”

Cattle

Cevin Jones, a feedlot owner near Eden, Idaho

Idaho feedlot owner Cevin Jones had one thing to say about how he’s faring after a year of the pandemic.

“I’m still here,” he said.

Jones, who operates Inter-mountain Beef in Eden north-east of Twin Falls, had just started his term as chairman of the U.S. Meat Export Federation when the pandemic hit. That put the kibosh on his year of international travel to build trade relationships.

At home, cattle markets tanked and cattle backed up in the pipeline across the country. Fortunately, he had a meatpacker who didn’t lower the price it paid for his cattle.

“We worked through it together in a cooperative way,” he said.

His operation did better than most feedlots outside the area. But the pandemic did have impacts, he said.

“There were some ups and downs — and a lot of uncertainty,” he said.

He was infected with COVID-19 and was down for two weeks. His office manager and two other employees

also contracted the virus.

“I was worried about the day half the crew would get it,” he said.

Thankfully, that didn’t happen, but the pandemic affected employee morale, he said.

Beef demand rebounded quickly, but the industry is still working through the backlog of cattle. That’s holding down prices, which is frustrating. Strong beef demand and surging exports should be supporting \$120 per hundredweight for fat cattle, but they’re only bringing about \$114, he said.

As for cow-calf producers, most don’t market calves in the spring. But the pandemic depressed prices industrywide, and they probably didn’t do so well last fall when they did sell, he said.

Dairy

Willie Bokma, dairy farmer, Twin Falls, Idaho

Dairy farmers in southern Idaho were not immune to the milk dumping and crashing prices that also took place across the country early in the pandemic.

“The entire COVID thing cost us a lot of money,” said Willie Bokma, a Twin Falls dairy farmer.

Bokma is a member of Magic Valley Quality Milk marketing cooperative, which rotated dumping among its members in the first few months of the pandemic. Milk checks were thin, and over-base production sold for next to nothing, he said.

“It was awful. It was catastrophic,” he said.

His share of the pain was three days worth of dumped milk, about 300,000 pounds and \$40,000.

“If we hadn’t had government payments, it would have been terrible. That saved our bacon,” he said.

He had also locked in some milk production under the Dairy Revenue Protection program, which helped tremendously, he said.

Producers who didn’t sign up for government programs, such as DRP or Dairy Margin Coverage, were in a tough spot. And he feels bad for those who sold out before the government assistance programs kicked in, he said.

One year later, consolidation in Idaho’s dairy industry is rampant, he said.

“That’s kind of scary ... very disconcerting,” he said.

Neither he nor any of his employees contracted the

virus as far as he knows. But the employee situation has been tough in terms of worker availability, and he’s hoping the U.S. Senate will pass an immigration reform bill, he said.

The pandemic turned things upside down and brought new threats farmers hadn’t imagined.

“We’re used to the fear now,” he said.

Wheat

Mike Carstensen, a farmer in Lincoln County, Wash.

The pandemic didn’t change much for wheat growers, farmer Mike Carstensen said.

Carstensen farms roughly 5,000 acres in northwest Lincoln County and is chairman of the Washington Grain Commission board of directors.

“Most operations are basically one guy doing the work,” Carstensen said. “We don’t hire labor except at harvest. So not much different. Any social activities or farm meetings are virtual and in no way are they as good as in person.”

Carstensen said he’s had to begin scheduling ahead to get seed and parts. Parts are limited because of supply chain issues due to COVID, he said. Seed houses are open but because of limited contact it’s best to arrange a visit beforehand.

Carstensen said he was most concerned about the pandemic’s effect on the overall economy and people out of work, and students not attending schools in person.

In the year ahead, Carstensen is wary of increasing input costs and input supply slowdowns for growers.

He’s optimistic that more vaccinations will allow more normal, in-person interactions, including meetings with overseas customers.

“We need to get back to the in-person relationships,” he said. “Our customers are our friends and we value their relationships.”

Farmworker
Julio Gutierrez, near Pasco, Wash.

While COVID-19 restrictions rocked the U.S. economy in 2020, agriculture chugged along as an essential business, with legions of migrant and seasonal laborers

working to keep homebound Americans fed.

Julio Gutierrez spent the early days of the pandemic in April and May harvesting asparagus at Larsen Farms near Pasco, Wash. At first, he said news of the virus had him scared.

“Some people were dying of it, and some people were getting really sick,” Gutierrez said of the news reports about COVID-19.

However, Gutierrez, 33, said he needed to work to support his wife and three kids. A native of Sinaloa, Mexico, Gutierrez is an experienced farmworker who has spent nine years at Larsen Farms, splitting his time between hand-cutting rows of asparagus and running the scale house.

Last year was unlike any other, Gutierrez said in Spanish. His crew boss, Hector Lopez, assisted in translation.

“When the pandemic hit, it kind of changed things,” Gutierrez said. “I would just take all the precautions that were in the news, and try not go out as much as I used to.”

On the farm, that meant wearing a mask and frequently sanitizing his hands. Larsen Farms has approximately 130 workers harvesting up to 800 pounds of asparagus a day.

Lopez said the workers are spread out in the fields, which made it easier for them to maintain 6 feet of social distance versus working side-by-side in a warehouse.

“(Harvest) ran normal,” Lopez said. “Everybody would show up to work. They would just take the precautions.”

Gutierrez said he had no problems finding work. After asparagus season, he went on to his other normal jobs picking cherries and processing potatoes at other farms in southeast Washington.

He said he felt safe working on the farms, and has since received his first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. He will receive his second dose this month.

“I learned that by taking care of myself, and taking the precautions, I would be OK,” Gutierrez said.

Sierra Dawn McClain, Don Jenkins, Brad Carlson, Carol Ryan Dumas, Matthew Weaver and George Plaven contributed to this story.