

# H-2A cutoff averted as virus adds to labor worries

By Dan Wheat and George Plaven  
EO Media Group

A potential crisis preventing H-2A-visa agricultural foreign guestworkers from crossing the Mexican border into the U.S. because of coronavirus concerns has been averted.

On March 16, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico announced it would suspend processing routine immigrant and non-immigrant visas for border crossings on March 18 in an effort to curb the spread of coronavirus.

H-2A visas are non-immigrant agricultural work visas good for up to 10 months.

U.S. farm labor associations worked with the USDA and State Department and by late March 17 they

received assurances H-2A visas and H-2B non-agricultural visas would continue to be processed.

Dan Fazio, executive director of Wafra, a Washington-based farm labor association, said returning H-2A and H-2B workers will be processed and most consulates are continuing to process new and returning workers.

USDA and the State Department are working on a protocol so all H-2A-visa applicants can be processed, Fazio said.

From Jan. 1 through March 15, Wafra provided 5,000 H-2A workers to Washington state growers, mostly for pruning fruit trees.

"We were lucky. We're entering a slower period where we were only cross-

ing 120 workers this week compared with 1,000 a week a few weeks back," Fazio said.

Demand ramps up in May as growers need workers for apple thinning and cherry harvest, he said.

The last big push of the season is from Aug. 10 to Sept. 1 as growers enter apple and pear harvest, he said.

A record 257,667 H-2A-visa positions were approved by the U.S. Department of Labor in 2019. Washington state ranked third with 26,226 positions.

Fazio said the H-2A program is well regulated and has a proven track record of handling health emergencies.

For example, Fazio pointed to an outbreak of mumps at a worker camp

in the Columbia Basin last year. He said Wafra worked quickly with the Washington State Department of Health to isolate four workers who tested positive for the illness, while quarantining 100 other workers who might have been exposed.

"We don't think any of our farms are going to get COVID-19 by the time workers are coming in May," Fazio said. "But if we don't get them here, we don't have an economy."

Meanwhile, agricultural employers and labor unions are emphasizing increased protections for worker health and safety.

The United Farm Workers union sent an open letter to all agricultural employers requesting "further protective steps to ensure the safety of farmworkers, protect buyers and safeguard consumers."

Those steps include extending state-required sick pay to 40 hours or more, eliminating the 90-day waiting period for new farmworkers to be eligible for sick pay and offering day-care assistance for farmworker families.

Reyna Lopez, executive director of Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste, or PCUN, said they are reaching out to state agencies to ensure employers provide multi-lingual training and educational materials for workers.

"If folks don't understand what the threat is ... that is when we actually see people being pretty careless, or not taking precautions," Lopez said.

Lopez said she is not



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**Workers prune apple trees in East Wenatchee, Washington. Safeguards aimed at stopping the spread of COVID-19 coronavirus could threaten the supply of H-2A farmworkers from outside the U.S.**

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**Not only is COVID-19 pandemic having a financial impact on cattle producers, it is also challenging the beef supply chain, industry experts say.**

## Coronavirus brings uncertainty to the cattle and beef markets

By Carol Ryan Dumas  
EO Media Group

Cattle producers are feeling the impact of the coronavirus pandemic as prices fall at auction and in futures contracts.

Not only is the pandemic having a financial impact on cattle producers, it is also challenging the beef supply chain, Colin Woodall, National Cattlemen's Beef Association CEO, said in the "Beltway Beef" podcast on Friday.

NCBA is coordinating and talking with all segments of the supply chain to keep beef moving, he said.

"We all need to understand we need to keep beef moving throughout the chain in order to make sure this market situation is not any worse than it currently is," he said.

Right now, there aren't any issues with packing plants scaling back or inspections by USDA. Things are moving forward, he said.

"But we also know that this is a very fluid situation," he said.

Almost every day brings something new. That's why he said NCBA needs to maintain contact with all the segments of the supply chain to stay apprised of what's happening — and if changes need to be made, NCBA can be part of that discussion to ensure beef continues to be on the shelves.

"This is a high priority for NCBA, and we are working with the government, working with the supply chain, working with Congress to ensure that we keep beef moving," he said.

As for the impact on cattle markets, there's still a lot

of clarity to be obtained in the next few weeks if not the next 30 to 45 days, Kevin Good, CattleFAX vice president, said.

"We need to get confidence back in the markets, not only in the cattle but obviously in the financials and across the board," he said.

Live cattle futures continued to freefall this past week. Cattle prices have followed suit and have been soft the last couple of weeks. Price levels now are pretty tough for yearling and cow-calf operators.

"There's no doubt about it, we're at or below breakevens in some of those categories," he said.

The industry has done an adequate job at harvesting cattle year to date. Product has moved exceptionally well, and demand has been extremely strong, he said.

"But unfortunately, the markets are building in a lot of uncertainty. They're building in a lot of softer-type demand levels than we would expect to see," he said.

The key is to get down the road a few weeks and let markets become a little more sure of when the coronavirus outbreak will be contained and when commerce and travel are expected to be more normal, he said.

The market should then recover to some degree. Hopefully, he said, that's a shorter term duration rather than longer term. Each week, each month of uncertainty will bring some demand and economic disruption.

"Hopefully, within a few weeks, we'll have a better grasp as far as a timetable where we get back to more of a normalcy," he said.