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North Carolina Leaders Act to Protect Workers at Food Processing Facilities

Raleigh, N.C.

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After witnessing outbreaks at food processing plants in other states and receiving reports of cases among workers in our state, North Carolina public and private leaders have come together to take swift action to protect workers here from COVID-19. The NC Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS), the NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (NCDACS), local health departments, plant managers and corporate owners, community health centers and local hospitals are working together to keep workers safe and to help ensure the world's food supply remains stable.

"Agriculture and agribusinesses are on the front lines of this crisis just like hospital workers, first responders, grocery store staff, truck drivers and many more. Their work is different, but every bit as critically important," said Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler. "We are in contact with the companies, public health officials and our federal inspection partners. The companies are working to implement recommendations of the CDC and state public health and local officials to keep these facilities operating and producing a stable supply of safe and nutritious food."

Following consultation with the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, NCDHHS and NCDACS developed interim guidance to help protect workers at food processing facilities from COVID-19. The interim guidance builds on previous CDC guidance for essential workers. It is not intended to replace any existing worker health and safety requirements of the U.S. and North Carolina Departments of Labor. Food processing facilities in North Carolina are regulated by the NC Department of Labor (NCDOL) for industrial hazards, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture and NCDACS for food handling and safety.

There are currently outbreaks in five food processing facilities located in Bladen, Chatham Duplin, Lee and Robeson counties. An outbreak is defined as two or more positive cases. Local health departments are conducting outbreak investigations including contact tracing to determine who else may have been exposed. Health care providers and hospitals are ensuring that those who test positive for COVID-19 are connected to care.

Food processing plants report that they are doing temperature and symptom checks, encouraging sick employees to stay home and implementing paid sick leave for those with COVID-19 or suspected of having COVID-19. They are also providing personal protective equipment and employing social distancing policies where possible. Strike teams composed of staff from NCDHHS, NCDACS, NCDOL and local health departments and with virtual support from NIOSH will be available to conduct on-site assessments and providing technical assistance to plants to limit further spread.

"North Carolina's response to COVID-19 cuts across departments and sectors, particularly when it comes to protecting those working so that we all have food to put on our tables. The department will continue to provide guidance and support to our sister agencies and partners on the ground as they respond to this new virus," said Mark Benton, Assistant Secretary for Public Health at NCDHHS.

Workers at food processing facilities help ensure the world's food supply remains stable and provide an essential service to the state and country and globally. There are 200 food processing facilities in North Carolina. Food and agriculture is recognized by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security as being one of 16 critical infrastructures for national security (https://ncdhhs.us4.list-manage.com/track/click?u=58ec19aaea4630b1baad0e5e4&id=d3e3072e2d&e=a522c33db6) .

According to the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) (https://ncdhhs.us4.list-manage.com/track/click?u=58ec19aaea4630b1baad0e5e4&id=6bf3104e91&e=a522c33db6) , there is no evidence that food or food packaging is associated with the transmission of COVID-19.

For more information on North Carolina's COVID-19 response and links to other guidance go to: www.nc.gov/covid19 (https://ncdhhs.us4.list-manage.com/track/click?u=58ec19aaea4630b1baad0e5e4&id=d7d19330fb&e=a522c33db6) .

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