



Interim Guidance for Pick-Your-Own Operations May 12, 2020

The Department has created a number of essential services interim guidance documents to assist agricultural entities in safely operating and conducting business during the pandemic. The Department's guidance regarding implementing sanitation and physical distancing measures available on this website remain appropriate for farms, food producers and other ag businesses to utilize in their daily operations.

Pick-Your-Own (PYO) operations face a unique challenge during the COVID-19 outbreak. These farms generally have a large number of customers that visit that farm in a relatively short period of time, and those customers spend a significant amount of time on the farm. [New protocols](#) for sanitization, customer flow, and payment methods should be implemented and clearly communicated to customers.

We strongly urge all PYO operations to assess your operations and implement measures to:

- **Ask visitors to self-screen for symptoms and stay home if sick.**
- **Maintain physical distancing.**
- **Minimize party size and/or gatherings.**
- **Minimize 'touches'.**
- **Increase hand-washing.**
- **Increase sanitation of high-touch surfaces.**
- **Require staff and customers, who are able, to wear face masks.**

Managing PYO During COVID-19

BEFORE YOUR CUSTOMERS ARRIVE: Update your website, social media, and email marketing to explain this year's ground rules and any changes to your systems. Be clear and positive about the best ways for your customers to purchase your products safely.

- Look at your layout and try to set up a 1-way traffic pattern so customers aren't backtracking at any point.
- Determine how you will maintain physical distancing of at least 6 feet between parties **in line to enter, in your picking area, and in your checkout space.**
- Decide how many people you will allow in each area at a time.
- Identify **high-touch surfaces** (tent posts, baskets, bench edges, etc) that will need to be cleaned and sanitized on a set schedule.
- Develop a system to allow your staff to **increase their hand-washing.**
- Decide if you are going to provide more hand-washing stations or hand sanitizer for customers.
- Decide how you will **minimize touches** or exchanges of items at checkout.

Once you have come up with your COVID-19 system, communicate that with your customers.

- Provide consistent, clear information across all media (website, social, print) regarding your hours, special payment types, making reservations, and anything else critical to the success of your system.
- If you are using a reservation/appointment system for picking time slots, share information about your process widely through all of your media channels.
- Make sure your messaging shows that you are using recommended practices for sanitation and distancing. (This may mean staging some new photos to avoid posting crowded pictures from previous years. Find more social media tips [here.](#))
- Ask customers to **self-screen for [symptoms of COVID-19](#)** and to stay home if they may be sick.
- Ask customers to **minimize the size of their group.**
- Require customers who are able to wear a face covering while on the premises.

IMPORTANT PARAMETERS WHEN OPENING TO THE PUBLIC: Managing your sales safely is going to take some planning this year. As the public health situation evolves, you may need to adapt again. Prepare to be flexible, and incorporate the basic health concepts into your systems now.

Farm, food, and horticulture businesses were broadly deemed essential services by the Governor's Emergency Proclamation of March 24, 2020. The Governor's recent phased plan for [Restarting Maine's Economy](#) does not change how agricultural businesses have been operating except to require that [cloth face masks](#) be worn where physical distancing measures are difficult to maintain. The existing orders include important parameters around retail establishments and public gatherings that we will highlight here.

Retail Considerations: if your PYO enterprise has retail facing (enclosed) structures, please be aware of the following:

Under [current guidance in Maine](#) retail stores must limit the number of customers in their facilities at one time as follows:

Maximum number of customers allowed at one time	Square footage of store
5	Less than 7,500 sq ft
15	7,501 - 25,000 sq ft
50	25,001 - 50,000 sq ft
75	50,001 - 75,000 sq ft
100 customers, <u>with</u> mandatory shields between customers and check-out clerks as soon as is practicable	Over 75,001 sq ft

If you have an enclosed retail space that falls within the above listed categories, you'll also need to follow the measures below. (Many of these measures are still a good idea even in an open field environment.)

- Implement and actively enforce social distancing requirements in and around the facilities.
- Prominently post signage at all public entrances instructing customers to remain six feet away from other people inside and outside the store.
- Mark every customer line with signage and floor lines designed to impose social distancing.
- Disinfect the handles of every used cart and basket prior to customer reuse.
- Take all reasonable steps to minimize customer handling of unpurchased merchandise.
- Offer separate operating hours when persons over the age of 60 and customers with medical conditions will be the only customers in the store.

Social Gathering Considerations: The Governor's Phased Reopening limits the number of people allowed per gathering. It's important to differentiate between the number of people allowed to gather in a retail environment (outlined above) versus those who are gathering socially or for entertainment. Normally, many PYO businesses may have group tours, buses, or wagons transport visitors to field sections, hosted entertainment groups or farm camp/field trips. Under the Phased Reopening, however, please be aware that:

- **In May**, no gatherings of more than 10 people are allowed.
- **In June-August**, no gatherings of more than 50 people are allowed.

Non-agricultural activities for your customers at your PYO must abide by these gathering restrictions. This guidance will be updated should these gathering restrictions be changed.

MODIFYING YOUR OPERATIONS: To operate safely through this pandemic, it is very likely you will need to change the way you've run your PYO operation in the past. You can find many ideas in Cornell University's extensive guide of [Best Management Practices for Pick-Your-Own Farms During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). We focus on Maine-specific practices and your strongest strategies for managing PYO sales safely here.

Traffic Control:

- Set up 1-way traffic patterns wherever possible to minimize person-to-person contact.
- Post signage:
 - Telling customers to maintain 6 ft of physical distance between people. [Find printable signs here.](#)
 - Identifying [symptoms of COVID-19](#) and asking customers to self-screen.
 - [Advising customers](#) to maintain personal hygiene, including washing hands frequently, avoiding touching their faces, and wearing masks where social distancing is not possible.
 - [Directing customers](#) into your traffic pattern.
- Mark customer travel lanes, including markers to signify 6 ft distances any place customer lines may form.
- Separate your welcome area from your checkout area to minimize congestion.

Minimizing Touches:

- Provide new, single-use picking containers wherever possible. Only use reusable containers if they are able to be adequately cleaned and sanitized between each use. Avoid letting customers bring containers from home.
- Consider selling products by units of volume rather than weight.
- If accepting cash, adjust pricing to round numbers to limit the need to make change.
- Use one-way or touchless payment processes to minimize contact between customers and staff. Pre-payment online may be one option.

- Consider installing plexiglass sneeze guards at eye level between customers and checkout staff.
- Have separate designated staff manage payment transactions if possible. Provide them with gloves and facemasks, and provide coverage to allow them to wash their hands frequently.

In The Field:

- Mark off picking blocks to designate customer's individual picking space wherever possible.
- Assign customers to picking blocks in a First-In, First-Out (FIFO) rotation. The first customers to enter pick closest to the exits, where they will be the first to leave.
- Consider alternating rows or designating walking paths to prevent customers from squeezing past each other in the same rows.
- Consider providing an option to reserve picking times to allow you to manage customer numbers in the field.
- Only allow as many customers in the field as can safely maintain 6 ft minimum physical distancing.
- Post clear signage directing customer flow into, through, and out of the fields.
- As always, be sure to do a safety walk through before opening to the public to address tripping hazards, electrocution hazards, equipment hazards, etc.
 - [Farm Stand and U-Pick Produce Operations Safety Best Practices](#)
 - [Pick-Your-Own Safety Checklist](#)
 - [NC State Extension Best Practices for You Pick operations.](#)

Cleaning and Sanitizing:

- Clean and sanitize all high-touch surfaces like card readers, counters, scales, door handles, and bathroom fixtures frequently. Set a schedule and provide coverage for it in your staffing plans.
- Surfaces must be clean and free of organic matter before sanitizers and disinfectants will be effective. Make sure there's no visible debris or grime on your surfaces before you sanitize or disinfect them. Consider using plastic covers on surfaces that are not easy to clean to create a smooth, wipeable surface.
- Only use [disinfectants approved for use against COVID-19 in Maine](#). Make sure the chemical you're using is appropriate for the surface and the way you're using it. **Follow all label instructions for use.**
- Disinfecting usually requires a higher concentration and/or a longer dwell time on the surface than sanitizing. **Follow all label instructions for use.**

- Sanitizers and disinfectants are considered pesticides. Commercial agricultural producers are [required to keep records](#) of mixing and application.
- If you are providing [hand-washing stations in the fields](#), clean, sanitize, and stock them (with soap, clean water, and paper towel) on a regular schedule. Make sure all waste, including grey water, is captured. Post signage on [proper hand-washing technique](#).
- Give your employees clear instructions on when to change gloves, when to wash hands, and how often to wash hands. Provide staff coverage to allow them to follow your instructions.

Note: Information about COVID-19 is still emerging. It is a lipid-enveloped virus which means soap is effective against it, as is heat. Freezing is not likely to be an effective means to inactivate the virus. Early research shows the virus can survive in an active, transmissible state for ~24 hours on cardboard, and up to ~2-3 days on hard, non-porous surfaces like stainless steel and hard plastic. There is no evidence to date that it can be transmitted through food or food packaging.

You will need to train your team in your new system, and you will likely need to adjust that system at some point. Make sure you are supporting your staff by providing them with the time, training, and supplies they need to follow your instructions. No safety system works without them.

The Guidance will be updated should public health measures change. More information and interim guidance can be found on the Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry's [COVID-19 page](#).

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