

COVID-19 keeps Georgia produce farmers from hiring labor, exporting crops

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Georgia produce farmers are used to fighting plant diseases on their crops but planting resistant varieties or spraying pesticides won't keep Coronavirus (COVID-19) away. This disease has shut down borders and reduced access to the markets where farmers sell their crops, is keeping essential farm labor out of the country, and prevents produce from being imported, too, according to University of Georgia Cooperative Extension experts.

"The difference between Covid-19 and plant diseases, thrips, tariffs and hurricanes, is that, while the others affected the specialty crop industry directly, COVID-19 will indirectly affect the entire industry," said Greg Fonsah, UGA Extension agricultural economist for vegetables, fruit and pecans. "Since COVID-19 became a pandemic, most countries including the United States have shut down their borders and imposed travel restrictions."

Georgia agriculture has a farm gate value of about \$14 billion. Most of the state's fruits and vegetables are handpicked by seasonal, migrant or immigrant labor.

On March 20, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Customs and Border Protection placed restrictions on travel to land ports of entry and ferry services between the U.S. and Mexico until April 20, 2020.

"The announcement that the U.S. Embassy in Mexico will stop interviews of seasonal workers has sent another wave of panic to the existing COVID-19 pandemic fear," Fonsah said. "Common sense tells us that if this happens, chances are that there will be huge labor shortages, not only for Georgia farmers but for the Southeast region and the entire country, especially if the decision is not reversed or relaxed in a timely manner."

Fonsah and his colleague, Justin Shealey, UGA Extension coordinator in Echols County, have determined that a shortage of migrant and/or immigrant seasonal workers would result in the following:

1. Huge field crop loss for some handpicked fruits and vegetables as some growers may not have enough seasonal or permanent labor force to harvest their crops.
2. Social distancing, although necessary for safety reasons, will also delay the harvesting process and increase the loss incurred since these are mostly perishable food crops.
3. Georgia could lose over a billion dollars if hypothetically, only 50% of its specialty crops are harvested. Nationwide, the entire fresh food industry may lose billions of dollars in crop loss.
4. Although the U.S. exports significant amounts of specialty crops to Mexico and Canada, the U.S. also imports more from these two countries than it exports to them. Thus, shutting down the borders and restricting visas to migrant labor deprives entry of fresh imported food from Mexico and Canada to subsidize what the U.S. produces.
5. The huge shortage of both domestic and imported food would affect the entire fresh food value supply chain and result in a nationwide food crisis.
6. Price could exponentially spike due to the limited domestic quantity.
7. The lack of seasonal and/or permanent labor force needed for harvesting might put enormous financial pressure on farmers and may put some out of business without any form of government assistance, and;
8. The U.S. Department of Labor relaxed the rigidity of some provisions of the H-2A program requirement on April 1, including contract possibilities, workers who arrive after the start date and application fees. The policies of origin of migrant labor may still deprive qualified workers from entering the U.S., Fonsah said, and others may be afraid to apply given the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths reported in the U.S.

For more information on the economics of Georgia agriculture, go to www.agecon.uga.edu/extension.