



# WISCONSIN AGRICULTURE AND COVID-19

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JANUARY 2021

## Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the critical intersection between agricultural production, the food supply chain, and consumers became very clear. As we look back at DATCP and Wisconsin agriculture's response to COVID-19 in 2020, it is important to understand these connections and identify ways to continue to work together to support the state's farmers, food industry, and ultimately the state's economy.

## Production Agriculture

The foundation of Wisconsin's \$104.8 billion agriculture industry is our hardworking farmers and bountiful farms. In the five years prior to COVID-19, the state's farmers dealt with numerous blows including low commodity prices, extreme weather patterns, and international trade uncertainty.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the need to facilitate direct communication between stakeholders and state and federal government agencies was vital. This connection was key to understand the challenges presented and work toward possible solutions. At DATCP, leaders quickly coordinated regular conference calls between multiple stakeholders. The designated groups included:

- Agricultural lending, insurance and access to capital
- Food supply and delivery
- Dairy industry
- Livestock industry
- Crops and agribusiness

As the pandemic evolved, the participants and frequency of these conversations evolved as well.

The conference calls allowed state and federal government agencies, including DATCP, to share information and hear directly from stakeholders about existing concerns to try to facilitate solutions. As issues arose, such as the availability of CO<sub>2</sub> for food packaging, separate conversations were organized as needed with partners such as ethanol producers, meat packers, cheese processors, and beverage manufacturers.

In April, eight agricultural organizations joined together to write a [letter](#) to Governor Evers to share estimated and projected losses to Wisconsin commodities as a result of COVID-19 and request direct government payments to farmers. Governor Tony Evers, DATCP, and the Wisconsin Department of Revenue (DOR) responded rapidly, fulfilling the request for \$50 million of the state's federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding.

DATCP worked closely with DOR to distribute the direct support to more than 15,000 farmers across the state through the [Wisconsin Farm Support Program](#). These farmers received payments up to \$3,500 to help cover economic losses during the pandemic.

In addition to this financial support, DATCP's [Wisconsin Farm Center](#) remained available to farmers through its toll-free number and its email address. Throughout the pandemic, staff responded to a clear need among farmers for financial analysis, business planning, and access to mental health counseling vouchers. To offer relief to farmers who had to dispose of milk due to COVID-19, DATCP [partially lifted the state milk assessment](#) for disposed milk from May 14, 2020 until the end of the federal major disaster declaration.

Whenever possible during the pandemic, DATCP worked to offer services virtually to farmers and the agricultural community. This included holding public hearings and board meetings via teleconference or web-

based technology, and allowing remote notarizations to submit nominations in market order elections. DATCP also extended pesticide applicator certifications and partnered with the Division of Extension at the University of Wisconsin – Madison to rapidly develop an [online exam](#) for individuals to become temporarily certified as a commercial pesticide applicator.

In fall, Wisconsin mink farmers faced a new challenge when animals on two farms died and tested positive for SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19 in humans. DATCP quickly quarantined both farms and maintained close coordination with numerous local, state, and federal partners, including the Centers for Disease Control, the Department of Health Services, and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). This One Health approach is critical in addressing animal and human health responses. By collaborating with animal and human health experts, we were able to respond effectively to the outbreak and help Wisconsin's mink industry understand and implement best practices for the future.

In December, Governor Evers invested additional federal CARES Act funds in agriculture when he [announced](#) up to \$3.25 million to support Wisconsin's ethanol plants. This investment will increase demand for Wisconsin corn from our state's growers and will allow ethanol facilities to produce additional CO<sub>2</sub>, which is critical to food and beverage packaging and to the production of dry ice. Dry ice is critical to not only the agricultural industry, but also to the distribution of COVID-19 vaccine at ultra-cold temperatures.

## Food Supply Chain

Wisconsin is home to a mature food production, processing, and distribution network that moves products from those who grow them to those who need them. In Wisconsin, agriculture is a vital employer, with about one in nine people in the state working in a job related to agriculture. This includes jobs at Wisconsin's small and large food processors. These food supply chain workers were quickly deemed essential at the onset of the pandemic and continued working to produce food for consumers around the world.

COVID-19 created challenges across the supply chain that had never been seen before. Early in the pandemic, consumers quickly transitioned from eating at restaurants, schools, and cafeterias to eating at home. This rapid and dramatic change in consumer purchasing created unprecedented demand at grocery and convenience stores, upending the types, packaging, and labeling required for the flow of products. For example, processors could not quickly transition from the infrastructure needed to process milk destined for cartons in schools, to milk that would go home with customers in gallon jugs. Bottlenecks in the supply chain quickly became especially apparent in the livestock industry and meat processing. Higher-end cuts of meat, such as steaks, needed cold storage space, and other cuts of meat, such as ground beef, were hard to keep on retail shelves.

To meet consumer demand, food processors were also navigating the challenge of protecting their employees while keeping production going. Government agencies quickly worked with agricultural organizations to assemble information and resources in the event that processors needed to close and market-ready products and animals were left on the farm with nowhere to go. DATCP and DNR created [guidance](#) for dairy farmers in case they needed to dispose of milk on the farm. Numerous government partners contributed to DATCP's online Livestock [Resource Coordination Center](#). This clearinghouse provided assistance to farmers looking for local market options for their livestock, or if needed, information on humane euthanasia and depopulation.

As COVID-19 continued, DATCP turned to Wisconsin's small, main street meat businesses to help identify additional slaughter opportunities. In an approximately six-month period between April and October, state-inspected slaughter at these facilities increased about 37%. The Wisconsin Grocers Association (WGA) worked with DATCP to help grocers access locally processed meat when their routine meat suppliers were unable to deliver. DATCP prepared a list of nearly 450 Wisconsin and federally licensed meat processing establishments in a searchable database for WGA members to access online and search for a processor near them. This created a

new marketing opportunity for local meat processors during a challenging time, while keeping meat on grocery store shelves. Throughout 2020, DATCP advocated often for Wisconsin agriculture on a national-level, including sending a letter to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service requesting state-inspected meat plants to have flexibility to ship interstate as a result of supply chain disruptions.

As food processors and grocers continued their work during the pandemic, DATCP quickly adapted its interactions with these essential businesses by performing what the Department called [Focused Food Safety Checks](#). While critical in-person visits such as slaughter inspection and pasteurization checks still occurred, DATCP staff in the Division of Food and Recreational Safety conducted hundreds of phone and video calls with restaurants, retailers, recreational establishments, and dairy plants. This not only helped ensure standards were being met, it also provided a vital pipeline for continued communication between DATCP and its stakeholders as they tried to pivot operations to meet changing conditions.

As food businesses across Wisconsin adapted to rapidly changing circumstances and new operating structures, DATCP staff worked to provide guidance through email bulletins, website resources, and online [guidelines](#). Accessing personal protective equipment (PPE) was a challenge for many business owners throughout COVID-19. When the State of Wisconsin made 60,000 cloth face masks available for distribution to essential workers, DATCP worked with industry organizations to identify those with the greatest need and distribute them through partnerships with the Wisconsin Restaurant Association, the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association, the Midwest Food Products Association, the WGA, the Wisconsin Petroleum Marketers Association and others.

## Consumers

Maintaining clear, coherent messaging to consumers was a key component of the COVID-19 response. DATCP worked with WGA, Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin (DFW), and other partners to assure consumers that food was safe and that nutritious food has, is, and will be available. While prices may increase on certain products or select foods not be available at a specific time, food will continue to be accessible. DATCP and DFW worked together across the Midwest to educate retailers on the disruptions in the dairy supply chain, particularly with regards to milk. This helped motivate retailers to [remove product purchasing limits](#) in an effort to keep product moving through the supply chain.

When the Governor declared a public health emergency in March, he also declared a [period of abnormal economic disruption](#) in Wisconsin because of COVID-19. This declaration triggered enforcement of Wisconsin's price gouging statute until the end of the emergency. In accordance with state statutes, DATCP's Division of Trade and Consumer Protection worked to review hundreds of complaints, request additional documentation from retailers when necessary to justify their pricing, and determine whether price gouging actually occurred or if the retail price increase was due to other increases along the supply chain.

COVID-19 created extreme hardships for families across Wisconsin. With many people unemployed and underemployed, Wisconsinites struggled to pay rent, buy food, and meet other basic needs. DATCP's Consumer Protection Hotline team responded to hundreds of consumer inquiries about price gouging, rental issues, identity theft, and refunds, and staff continually updated information and frequently asked questions on the Department's website.

Governor Evers invested a total of \$25 million of Wisconsin's federal CARES Act funds in creating the Food Security Initiative, an effort to support both farmers and consumers in need. The Food Security Initiative included \$5 million for COVID-19 Food Security Network Support Grants and \$20 million for COVID-19 Food Security and Wisconsin Products Grants. This money helped food banks and other non-profit organizations adapt to the infrastructure challenges they faced as a result of COVID-19 and purchase Wisconsin foods for distribution to those in need across the state and in the Tribal Nations.

The allocation of these federal funds came in addition to the many public and private efforts that took place throughout the year to connect Wisconsin products with those who could distribute food and necessities to families in need. Partnerships, such as the [Wisconsin Dairy Recovery Program](#), [Wisconsin Food and Farm Support Fund](#), and [Passion for Pork Program](#). DATCP specialists worked with partners in agriculture to help keep Wisconsin livestock, produce, and other food products moving off the farm, through the processing plants, and into the hands of those in need.

## Moving Forward

As the state continues to address this challenging pandemic, DATCP will continue to coordinate with its stakeholders and media partners to support Wisconsin agriculture. Continued research, product development, and process innovation is key to meeting today's challenges and preparing for the future. This is true not only in agriculture, but in every industry.

The long-term prosperity of Wisconsin's agricultural industry relies on the resiliency and success of our food supply chains and rural communities. As a state, we need to bolster our agricultural infrastructure and train workers for the most needed positions, from meat processing to food distribution. Investments in statewide infrastructure, including reliable broadband connection, is imperative for businesses, employees, students, and families. Wisconsin's agricultural workforce has been and will always be essential to our state's overall success. Employers will need to continue to ensure they have the PPE they need to keep their workforce safe, while adapting worker housing, transportation, and working conditions as needed.

Increased coordination across government agencies will allow us to respond more quickly to questions and challenges. During COVID-19, DATCP leadership worked to connect with other directors of agriculture in the Midwest region, including those in Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, Michigan, and more. Continued partnerships such as these will be very valuable moving forward to share resources within the region and elevate combined voices toward common causes.

## Conclusion

In response to COVID-19, the entire food supply chain, from the farmer to the consumer, adapted to many changes and challenges. Throughout 2020, communication among farmers, processors, retailers, distributors, and government officials was fundamental to determine a path forward. We were all required to think on our feet and find new ways of delivering essential services. Direct support was provided to farmers, the food supply chain, and consumers when it was needed most.

The connections developed during COVID-19 will be incredibly valuable moving toward continued response and recovery. DATCP is prepared to support Wisconsin's agriculture industry, including our producers, consumers, and the entire food supply chain into 2021 and beyond.