

Safeguarding the food chain:

Seed movement and food security during the COVID-19 crisis

An update by ISF, 7 April 2020

The world faces an unprecedented crisis with COVID-19. While the pandemic has put many countries under lockdown and brought normal activities to a halt, essential services like health care, food, infrastructure, finance and public administration continue. Key workers in essential services are those whose activities are vital to public health and wellbeing during the crisis.

Those in the seed sector belong to this category and continue their work as part of essential services to sustain the delivery of seed to farmers. Seed companies are allowed to carry out all essential services such as seed production, cleaning, packing and distribution of seed including lab services. Especially in the hardest hit countries, their work is critical to ensure that farmers can grow crops during the coming planting season, preventing any food shortages in the long run.

Farmers need continued access to seeds and other essential agriculture inputs. In a previous statement, the International Seed Federation (ISF) stated: "ISF believes that the world's long-term stability rests on several pillars, one of which is food security. Seed is the starting point of the food system. Farmers everywhere depend on access to quality seed in order to grow healthy crops."

Working together with national governments, representatives of the seed sector in different parts of the world are doing their best to ensure that seed workers can continue their activities in order to mitigate the impact on farming. Seed is a globally traded agricultural product, therefore, unrestricted international movement of seed is critical to ensure food security.

A look at the regions

The **African Seed Trade Association (AFSTA)** has called on its member associations "to keep in touch and open communication lines with your Ministry of Agriculture and seed regulators to stem off the possibility of barring seed movement across cities and countries if we are to save our continent from starvation in the second semester of the year and beyond."

The **Seed Association of the Americas (SAA)** has made a country-by-country assessment focusing on seed movement and regulatory activities related to the functioning of national plant protection organizations (NPPOs). Some countries like Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Guatemala, the US and Canada have already observed delays in shipment. A [statement](#) has been released by the **American Seed Trade Association (ASTA)**, along with a [dedicated COVID-19 website](#) where it keeps track of the latest developments impacting the seed industry.

The **Asia & Pacific Seed Association (APSA)** has issued a [statement](#) to allay concerns about impacts of the novel coronavirus on seed trade in Asia and the Pacific region. It was pointed out that food and seed — and international packages containing seeds and other vital agricultural inputs — are not a source for coronavirus transmission.

Member representatives in India, the Philippines, Thailand, Turkey, have initiated dialogue with their national governments to ensure a stable seed inventory level and ensure unhampered movement of cargo, agriculture and fishery inputs, food products and agribusiness personnel. In many countries, green lanes have been designated by local law enforcers where agricultural and fishery products are transported.

In Japan, seed companies rely on overseas production sites for seed production, therefore the travel restrictions are impacting their field inspectors and production staff. In China, a survey covering 1330 seed companies shows the pandemic has negatively impacted the production and operation of 90 percent of seed enterprises.

The **Australian Seed Federation (ASF)** puts out a daily information update for members regarding developments in the seed and agriculture space that relate to Covid-19 responses. In addition to direct political advocacy at the Federal and State level, ASF is also working closely with other agricultural input supplier industry associations (CropLife Australia, the fertilizer industry and the animal medicines industry) and also national and state farming organizations. A potential area of concern is the increasing air freight costs due to the shutdown of many commercial passenger aircrafts, while sea freight is also getting congested.

In **Europe**, the European Commission clarified that the production and transport of agricultural inputs such as plant reproductive material is included in the list of essential goods and services to which the so-called “green lane” procedures at borders shall be applied. It also recently released implementing regulation on temporary measures to contain risks to human, animal and plant health and animal welfare under the COVID-19 crisis. More information is available in the **Euroseeds** [website](#).

Member representatives in the [Netherlands](#), [Italy](#), [Spain](#) and [Sweden](#) have expressed how the pandemic has affected the seed sector in their countries, including the transport and logistics challenges, adjustment of work shifts to minimize the possibility of contact between workers; and reduced capacity of bodies that deal with seed certification and phytosanitary control.

The French Seed Union has setup a [webpage](#) to coordinate the information exchange to public authorities, monitor regulatory updates, and develop a collective response to the operational, logistical and technical challenges encountered by seed companies.

In almost all countries, the effect of the pandemic on the rest of value chain is cause for concern for the seed sector. In the Netherlands, for example, the ornamentals sector has been hard hit. The flower auction has destroyed some 80% of its unsold produce and retail chains all over Europe have already cancelled orders. A further concern affecting countries like Sweden, which depends on agriculture labor from other countries for fresh vegetable and fruit production, is the

risk that there will not be a sufficient workforce available at harvest due to travel restrictions and closing of borders by countries where the labor comes from.

"Covid-19 is testing our resilience and ability to adapt and adjust to exceptional circumstances," said World Food Prize 2019 laureate Simon Groot who gave a [message of support](#) to workers in the seed sector.

All over the world, seed companies have expressed solidarity and shared social media posts to say thank you to farmers, seed sector workers and everyone in the agri-food value chain, who are working to ensure food in shops is readily available even during the crisis.

What about the farmers?

"Today, more than ever, it is time to celebrate the farmers of the world that are not stopping and are keeping up and running their role of feeding the world, of ensuring that people in cities can have access to fresh, nutritious and healthy food," said the World Farmers Organisation (WFO).

WFO has launched a communication campaign under the hashtag #FarmersNeverGiveUp and #ThankYouFarmers to show the world that without farmers there can be no food and no future, especially under emergency conditions like those we are living these days. At the same time, a [dedicated section on the WFO website](#) is available to share news, initiatives, campaigns and adopted measures on the various issues affecting the farming community worldwide.

The non-profit Global Farmer Network based in Iowa, USA provides for some 200 farmer members a WhatsApp group that supports their efforts to stay connected, share information, ask questions and support each other. Some important on-the-ground stories told from the farmer's perspective can be found in its [website](#), including first-person narratives written by a farmer in India, the Philippines, Colombia, Argentina, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, UK and the USA.

"It is a good thing farming is a lonely job. So – keep healthy. We have our jobs to do to make the food and get it to where people can use it," said Mark Heckman, a farmer from the US. Another farmer, Paul Temple from the UK, said, "Farming is safer than some, but not immune." Read other [farmer views here](#).

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