

April 16, 2020

The Honourable Doug Ford
Premier of Ontario
Premier's Office
Room 281
Legislative Building, Queen's Park
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

RE: Supporting Ontario's agri-food and agricultural sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic

Dear Premier Ford,

Thank you for your continued leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the situation evolves, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) is receiving concerns from the business community and communicating them to all levels of government.

To begin, we want to extend our appreciation for the recent decision to update the list of businesses classified as essential. The list now includes construction projects due to be finished before October 4, 2020 and those that provide additional capacity in the production, processing, manufacturing, or distribution of food, beverages, or agricultural products. This decision will allow construction on project such as the Conestoga Cold Storage freezer in Kitchener, Ontario to continue. The lack of freezer capacity for the food processing industry could have presented a real risk, namely wasting large quantities of meat protein and causing food shortages in Canada's domestic food supply. This amendment provides much needed clarity for construction projects in agricultural and agri-food industries during the pandemic.

However, I am writing to provide you with insights into the gravity of the supply chain issues facing Ontario's agri-food sector – a sector that employs one in eight Ontarians and, in 2018, contributed \$47.7 billion to the province's GDP. As outlined below, the pandemic has created tremendous stress and a ripple effect on the agri-food and agricultural industries.

Several meat and poultry plants have been forced to close due to confirmed and presumptive cases of COVID-19 among staff and to ensure the safety of employees and customers. Other plants have slowed down production in Ontario, Quebec, and Alberta.

Accordingly, we encourage Public Health Ontario to endorse the document issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on April 8, 2020 (“Interim Guidance for Implementing Safety Practices for Critical Infrastructure Workers Who May Have Had Exposure to a Person with Suspected or Confirmed COVID-19”). The document aims to ensure the continuity of essential functions and recommends critical infrastructure workers in 16 sectors be permitted to continue working after potential exposure to COVID-19, provided they remain asymptomatic and precautions are implemented, rather than having to quarantine for 14-days. As the province moves towards economic recovery, decisionmakers and the newly formed Ontario Jobs and Recovery Committee should take the agri-food and agricultural sectors into consideration.

In addition, we recognize that our health care and frontline workers are the top priority when it comes to access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and rapid test kits. At the same time, the food manufacturing industry also faces challenges when it comes to accessing these essential supplies to mitigate against the spread of COVID-19. The Government of Ontario should therefore keep the needs of the food industry in mind as it procures PPE for health care workers and those in similar sectors. Furthermore, as companies begin shifting their production lines to produce PPE, the Province could play a role by connecting new and existing suppliers with employers who are finding it difficult to obtain this equipment for their workers. The Province could also provide employers with greater clarity when it comes to what type of masks are required in certain workplaces or scenarios, as not all workers require N95 masks.

We also wanted to raise concerns around the development of workplace safety guidelines by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development for key sectors including food manufacturing. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) has issued guidance for meat and poultry processors on the prevention and response to suspected and confirmed cases of COVID-19 among plant employees. This included input from the Public Health Agency of Canada. However, there are concerns that with multiple bodies – namely, the CFIA, local public health authorities, and, more recently, the Ontario Ministry of Labour – the food industry in Ontario will receive inconsistent guidance. Instead, the Ministry of Labour should focus on provincially registered food establishments.

To summarize, we encourage your government take the following steps to support Ontario’s agri-food and agricultural industries and our food supply:

- Align with the CDC’s guidance to allow critical workers, including those in the agri-food and agricultural sectors, to return to work if they are asymptomatic and appropriate precautions are implemented;
- Add the food industry’s need for personal protective equipment (PPE) and rapid test kits to the province’s procurement strategy;

- Connect new and existing producers of PPE to employers and sectors in need of, and facing challenges procuring, these supplies; and
- Focus on providing provincially registered food establishments with guidance.

Public health and safety are priorities for all Ontario businesses. We will continue to monitor and assess new developments pertaining to COVID-19 closely and work with our members, partners, and all levels of government to provide support to Ontario business.

Sincerely,



Rocco Rossi
President and CEO
Ontario Chamber of Commerce

CC: The Honourable Ernie Hardeman, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
The Honourable Monte McNaughton, Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development
The Honourable Laurie Scott, Minister of Infrastructure
Dr. Peter Donnelly, President and Chief Executive Officer, Public Health Ontario