

PPE Distribution to the Farm Community During the COVID Pandemic
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The COVID pandemic brought many problems to the country including the farm community. Henderson County North Carolina was not spared from the effects that the pandemic brought. The protection of our farm workers and their families quickly became an apparent need. Early reports of food shortages and lines in grocery stores made it readily apparent that a strong effort was needed to protect our farm workers and our food chain. Growers and packers were quickly asking where they could obtain masks, hand sanitizer and other PPE items. Henderson County Cooperative Extension (HCCE) immediately started working with county officials to obtain these supplies through the NC Emergency Management Services. Additionally, the office worked closely with NC Agromedicine at East Carolina University to obtain further supplies.

About two months after this effort began in Henderson County, NC Cooperative Extension partnered with the Department of Health and Human Services to provide disposable masks to county offices all across the state. While this was a welcome infusion of these masks, it did not begin to fill the needs in the county nor address many of the other items needed. Henderson County Cooperative Extension continued to obtain further supplies from cooperating partners.



The Extension office became a central distribution point for PPE supplies including masks, cloth and disposable, hand sanitizer, bleach, disinfectant, face shields, tyvek suits, touchless thermometers, and respirators. Along with the PPE supplies, Henderson County Cooperative Extension took advantage of this opportunity to provide educational materials in English and Spanish to workers and their families on how to best stop the spread of the virus and keep themselves protected. By the end of the season, Henderson County Cooperative Extension had distributed over \$75,000.00 in PPE supplies to growers and farm workers.



Additionally, the office partnered with True Ridge, Hola Carolinas and East Coast Migrant Head Start to provide PPE to the farm workers' families. These organizations were able to reach the farm workers' families better than Extension was equipped to do, but they lacked the supplies. This partnership not only made it possible for these organizations to serve their clientele, but it also strengthened relationships between HCCE and some of the underserved populations in the county. These relationships have flourished since this initiative brought them together.

Shipments of PPE were delivered to the HCCE office by US Mail, UPS and even by the National Guard. Much of the local farm economy is based on local retail fruit and vegetable roadside stands. These are critical to the \$30 million apple industry in particular. By equipping these businesses with the required PPE, it enabled them to stay open and keep their workers and customers safe from COVID infections. As a result, the fresh produce industry in the county had one of its best years in a long time in terms of sales and moving product.

People were delighted to be able to get out onto these farms into the fresh air and protected by the PPE that was supplied and socially distant. The ability to remain open and sell their products made it possible for these growers to make up for some of the losses that they had incurred in recent years due to disastrous weather conditions.

The distributions attracted the attention of local media outlets including the local newspaper and WLOS-TV in Asheville which brought favorable coverage to Cooperative Extension. WLOS-TV covers all of western North Carolina and upstate South Carolina and has a viewership of almost 250,000 people. This was another opportunity to educate the public on the benefits of PPE for all individuals and on the plight of the farm community during the pandemic. The PPE program with HCCE brought growers to our office numerous times throughout the season to pick up PPE supplies. The program brought awareness of the importance of safe practices to curtail spread of the virus and also allowed essential farm businesses to stay open.

Had HCCE not reached out to suppliers of these PPE materials at an early stage, many farm workers and farm operations would have been unprotected and thus created further risk of infection among the farm community. As it turned out, there was a minimum of COVID infections among our farm workers during the entire year, including the busy harvest season. We certainly feel this effort played a major role in keeping our farm community safe and healthy, educating them on the necessary steps to prevent COVID and showing Cooperative Extension as a willing partner to help them in this time of crisis.