Guide for
Banana Growers on
COVID-19

Contents

Guide for Banana Growers on COVID-19

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to contain it have potential to significantly impact your banana farm business.

To assist, ABGC has created this downloadable *Guide for Banana Growers on COVID-19* (Guide) which provides advice to growers on how to mitigate the risks and other important information.

ABGC has compiled this based on information available regarding COVID-19 from on-going meetings with Federal and State Government representatives, and with the National Farmers Federation (NFF) Horticulture Council.

ABGC is also involved with several Government working groups which are developing practical solutions to COVID-19 issues facing growers.

This information is provided as current best-practice guide only. It does not constitute legal advice, or advice from a qualified medical professional. The purpose of this Guide is to provide one central source of information.

Please be aware that the situation is changing rapidly and that this Guide may need to be further revised.

ABGC has also created a COVID-19 page on our website https://abgc.org.au/ so that new information can be made available quickly. We will continue to send out regular updates via our e-bulletins. The situation is very fluid and to stay informed it is important that you read all e-bulletins sent out.

Any queries on the information in this Guide, please contact Jim Pekin, CEO, Australian Banana Growers' Council: Jim.pekin@abgc.org.au or phone 0447 799 667.

2. Checklist

COVID-19 Banana Growers Checklist

The following checklist is for Australian banana growers to use as a current best-practice checklist. This is a guide only and individuals need to assess their own risk. It is also recommended that detailed records are maintained about the steps taken to reduce and manage risk in business operations.

Key considerations:

PHYSICAL **|** farm & packing shed
ORGANISATIONAL **|** managing people
ADMINISTRATIVE **|** accessing help & emergency procedures

PHYSICAL | FARM & PACKING SHED

	DONE	MORE TO DO	ACTION NEEDED	NOT RELEVANT
Property signage – alert visitors prior to entry & deter unnecessary callers				
Stringent site access policy – form to be completed before anyone enters the farm for the first time. See Farm Access in 6.2 of this ABGC Guide.				
Handwashing signage – ensure posters are displayed in appropriate areas promoting personal hygiene & how to stop the spread				
Handwashing facilities - all sites well stocked with soap, paper towels and disposal of water & used towels				
Hand sanitiser – located where handwashing facilities are not practical including property entrances, vehicles, farm machinery, equipment & packing tables				
Personal protective equipment (PPE) – adequate supply available (gloves, masks) & used appropriately				
Review cleaning procedures - particularly important for high risk & high touch areas including shared spaces such as meal rooms, packing sheds, door handles				
Separate toilet facilities – provide toilet options to separate teams to avoid transmission risk				
Tools and equipment – provide working teams & individuals their own tools & ensure they are cleaned appropriately after each person's use				
Packing shed layout – redesign layout so workers can be 1.5m apart (minimum). If not possible, consider Perspex barriers and/or PPE (face masks)				
Common areas – remove excess chairs & tables, space furniture apart to encourage staff to meet minimum 1.5m social distancing				
Work zones – break areas up into zones & limit crossings				

ORGANISATIONAL | MANAGING PEOPLE

	DONE	MORE TO DO	ACTION NEEDED	NOT RELEVANT
Current Workforce Assessment – are there employees at higher risk; aged 60+ with existing health conditions. Can these employees be reassigned to reduce risk of infection?				
Temperature checking – all staff checked daily prior to entering the workplace & record maintained of checks				
Team Management				
Pre-commencement checklist - including location & travel history & signed self-declaration completed				
Induction - all staff inducted including basic food safety, personal hygiene & social distance requirements				
Social isolation compliance – address any 14-day social isolation requirements (interstate movements)				
Daily staff health assessment – to ensure they are not suffering from fever, fatigue, cough, sneezing, aches & pains, runny or stuffed nose, sore throat, diarrhoea, headaches or shortness of breath				
Staff aware of social distance restrictions – maintaining 1.5m distance, avoiding personal contact, restrict face to face meetings				
Keep staff informed – regularly updates & remind staff of requirements				
Record keeping – individual declarations, team make-up, living arrangements (shared house, hostel), team rosters				
Translation – ensure all resources are understood & translated if required				
Interstate Workers – check current border controls & isolation requirements in section 8.3 of this ABGC Guide				
Workplace policies				
• Fit for work policy				
• Proactive leave policy (inc. social isolation)				
• Clear method for reporting and addressing personal illness, confirmed COVID-19 cases or close contact (isolation) requirements				
• Control of non-essential workplace visitors				
• Limitation of personal interaction between teams, transportation (truck) drivers				
• Ensure contractors (e.g logistics, suppliers) are made aware that they cannot bring other visitors with them without approval				

	DONE	MORE TO DO	ACTION NEEDED	NOT RELEVANT
Cleaning roster – allow additional time & resources for enhanced cleaning prior to shift changes. Maintain detailed records of cleaning activities				
Work crew and team size – reduce size of teams (to meet 1.5m spacing requirements & social isolation if required)				
Work schedules and shifts				
• stagger time between shifts to minimise interactions & avoid bottlenecks in meals areas, toilets and car park				
• stagger break times to manage usage of meal & toilets areas				
Accommodation				
• decentralise accommodation to separate into smaller teams				
• then keep teams together - the smaller the team, the better				
• minimise the use of shared cooking, laundry & toilet/shower facilities				
• ensure clear communication between your business & shared accommodation (hostel) & encourage teams stay & travel together (where possible)				
• identify alternative accommodation options if staff members are required to self-isolate				
Transport				
• transport teams together				
• ensure strict vehicle hygiene including adhering to social distance requirements (1.5m)				
• clean vehicles with sanitizer after each use (steering wheels, handles, seat belts)				

ADMINISTRATIVE | ACCESSING HELP & EMERGENCY PROCEDURES

	DONE	MORE TO DO	ACTION NEEDED	NOT RELEVANT
Help – the business has clearly identified who to contact for advice, what to do in the event of an infected worker & has a documented procedure ready to implement				
Emergency procedures • identify the source & immediately quarantine all the people that have been in close contact				
• contact appropriate health authority				
• immediately disinfect all equipment that the entire team was using including any shared facilities such as meal areas & toilets				
• ascertain as many details about the original source person to help authorities with traceability including housing & transport arrangements, recent travel, places visited like shops				
Visitor guidelines – have a documented summary of farm hygiene practices for any essential visitors such as mechanics or equipment repairers				

3. COVID-19 Basics

3.1   COVID-19 Symptoms

People with COVID-19 (coronavirus) may experience:

- Fever symptoms
- Coughing
- Sore throat
- Fatigue and/or
- Shortness of breath

3.2   How is it transmitted?

The virus is highly contagious and can spread from person to person through:

- 'Close contact" with an infectious person (including in the 24 hours before they had symptoms),
- Droplets from an infected person's cough or sneeze, and
- Touching objects or surfaces (objects, doorknobs, tables) that have droplets from an infected person and then touching your mouth or face.

The virus can stay viable on surfaces for a considerable length of time which is why an increased cleaning regime and hand washing is recommended.

The risk of catching COVID-19 from someone with no symptoms at all is very low, but not zero.

4. Business Continuity

There are important measures recommended to ensure you can continue to operate your farm in the event a COVID-19 case relating to your farm.

The following three pages detail three inter-related areas for consideration in regard to business continuity:

- Managing the risks to your farm,
- Managing your workforce, and
- Utilising Government assistance available.

Detailed advice on these topics are discussed later in this Guide.

The health authority in each state and territory is tracing COVID-19 cases to determine the source of the disease so as to limit the spread of infection. If there is a case related to your farm, one of the key pieces of information that they will investigate is who precisely the COVID-19 positive person had 'close contact' with. Those people would then be required to 'self-quarantine'.

5. Important Terms

Here are the important terms that everyone needs to understand. They are frequently used by Australian Governments and all Health Authorities.

Confirmed case: A person who tests positive to a validated test.
After seeking medical attention, the person must remain isolated until health authorities inform them it is safe for them to return to their usual activities.

Close contact: A close contact is defined as someone who:
• has had more than 15 minutes of face to-face contact (in any setting) with a person with confirmed coronavirus (including in the 24 hours before their symptoms appeared), or
• has shared a closed space (e.g. office or sealed room) with a person with confirmed coronavirus for more than two (2) hours (including in the 24 hours before their symptoms appeared).

People who may have been in close contact with a confirmed case of coronavirus, are required to **self-quarantine** for 14 days.

Self-quarantine means staying at home, in a motel room or provided accommodation, and not leaving for the period required to quarantine. Only people who usually live in the household should be in the home. Visitors are not allowed into the home.

Self-isolation is if you are sick with either a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19. You will be asked to self-isolate, unless your symptoms require treatment in hospital. The difference between self-quarantine and self-isolation is that self-quarantine is what the Health Authorities require well people to do just in case they are carrying the virus.

Casual contact is someone who has been in the same general area as a person who has tested positive for coronavirus while infectious.   You are a casual contact if you had less than 15 minutes face-to-face contact (in any setting) with a confirmed case (including in the 24 hours before their symptoms appeared).

Casual contacts do not need to be excluded from work while well.

Enclosed space refers to a room with four walls, but not to a packing shed where there is an open side. If enclosed, the size of the enclosed space, the staff density and the control of air flow and staff movements, in combination with other risk mitigation activities, will all be considerations.

6. Manage the risks to your farm

6.1 Know your COVID-19 risks

There are numerous risks associated with COVID-19, to farm businesses. This section suggests individual growers consider and assess them, so as to prioritise the areas of focus and responses.

Evaluate each function in your business (supply input, accounts, human resources, operations, WH&S, markets) and identify potential areas where COVID-19 could have a negative impact.

Ask yourself, what if:

- I am diagnosed with COVID-19?
- My staff are diagnosed with COVID-19?
- My staff need to self-isolate for 14 days and you must provide accommodation?
- There is a labour shortage – can the available workforce be used differently or upskilled?
- I am unable to access business supplies in my town?
- Freight services are delayed, or impact by staff losses?
- My internet or phone connections are down for an extended period?
- Demand for my product is reduced?

The following example lists some of the common risks for banana farms. More are discussed in the next section.

COVID-19 risk identified	Likelihood of risk happening	Consequences if it did happen	Identified risk level	Risk mitigation strategy
Shared accommodation				
Transport to and from work				
Close work				
Meal breaks				
Socialising outside work				
Farm management (owner/manager)				
Visitors				
Contractors				

6.2   Strategies to manage risks

Being able to demonstrate how the hygiene and social distancing measures are implemented on your farm will assist in mitigating the impacts of confirmed coronavirus cases within the workforce.

This may also reduce the number of staff who may need to be removed by the health department from your normal workstream.

Documentation also provides a body of evidence to inform any discussions with the health department regarding their quarantine or continued deployment within your business.

Health and Hygiene

- Strict adherence to hygienic procedures, with an increased focus on effective cleaning routines, contact surfaces, equipment, tools and facilities:

  - increased surveillance of hygiene effectiveness;
  - review to ensure sufficient access to hand washing and hygiene stations; and
  - cleaning and sanitising of packing shed and equipment, particularly high-contact areas including lunchrooms, smoking areas and bathrooms.

- Appropriate use and disposal of personal protective equipment (PPE).

- Ensure a "fit for work" policy to prevent site access by staff who may place the business at risk.

- Other measures such as documented and recorded COVID-19 training, a recorded health check prior to work and the wearing of specifically approved PPE for site entry.

Social distancing

- All staff including the grower must reduce contact with the community by only leaving your place of residence when necessary.

- Minimise physical contact – no handshakes, or other physical contact except between family members.

- Workers should attend work and comply with all current government regulations and directives regarding other activities that may be non-essential.

- Reduce the size of meetings to meet the current requirements for one person per 4 square metres. This includes staff meetings, training sessions, lunch breaks, shift changes, etc.

- Keeping a distance of 1.5 metres between people whenever possible. This should be considered in the context of team meetings; workstations; production lines; harvesting rotations; smoking areas; lunch, break and change rooms.

- Where such distancing is not possible for all employees, identify worker units where close contact will occur and segregate worker units by time or space based on close-contact likelihood. This includes during work activities as well as during meal breaks, smoking breaks, travel, accommodation and work-place socialisation.

- Maintaining social distancing in the absence of effective hygiene practices may not prevent the spread of this virus, especially in common areas of the workplace such as change rooms, lunchrooms and other amenities. Therefore, businesses must be vigilant in their hygiene practices, including frequent and proper hand-washing and routine cleaning of all surfaces.

- Minimise rotation or movement of staff through different work areas to keep close contacts to a known network including meal and smoke breaks (this will assist with internal contact tracing).

- Where feasible, splitting teams or units into smaller groups will reduce the number of workers impacted if a case of COVID-19 occurs in a team.

- Stagger or increase time between shifts to minimise unnecessary interactions between workgroups and eliminate bottlenecks (e.g.at foot bath, change room or carpark). Gaps between shifts can also provide a window for cleaning between work units.

- Restrict face-to-face meetings.

Transporting Workers

- Restrict the number of workers that travel together on buses and other forms of transport to and from your farm to conform with government social distancing guidelines, where feasible.

- Where such distancing is not possible, consider transporting workers in their work units. Ideally such units would also be housed together and not interact with others.

- Other alternatives include using perspex between rows of buses and having only one worker on each side of bus aisle

- Provide hand sanitiser on bus/vehicle and encourage employees to use it on entry and exit.

- Ensure good ventilation, particularly in smaller vehicles.

Informing your workforce

- Arrange mandatory worker meetings/toolbox talks, with every single employee.

- Provide workers with factsheets/posters that emphasise key messages around good hygiene practices, symptoms, keeping safe distances. (Links to these are included in section 8.3 of this Guide).

- Display these around entrance to packing shed and smoko areas.

- Inform the location of hand-sanitisers and how often they should be used.

- Inform contact numbers and procedures if a worker suspects they have COVID-19.

- Educate staff on the process to be followed if a worker is excluded from the workplace as result of being identified as a confirmed case or close contact. This should include the process for returning to work and may include discussion of job security or leave arrangements. The aim is to encourage staff self-reporting of suspected illness.

- Identify workers with symptoms of illness (particularly respiratory) for exclusion from work.

Farm Access

- Create a more stringent access policy for anyone entering your farm for the first time. You have the right to ask visitors and suppliers to your farm to call and provide information before arrival. A suggested health declaration form for employees in https://abgc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Employee-Personal-Disclosure-Statement.pdf

- Provide admin workers notes on symptoms to check for when speaking on the phone.

- Send email to stakeholders advising what changes will take at the worksite.

- Post visible signage at the property entrance.

- Provide site entry details on the company website.

- Provide hygiene facilities for transport workers and visitors.

- Provide hand sanitiser where hand basins are not available.

Workforce Recruitment

COVID-19 may impact your ability to source harvesting and production workers. Many growers have relied on a regular pattern of recruiting workers, but this could be disrupted. There are other ways to recruit:

- Use the Harvest Trail online facility at https://jobsearch.gov.au/harvest

- Lodge vacancies directly onto www.jobsearch.gov.au or register your business on the Job Active website to post positions for free.

- Contact a licensed Labour Hire service provider https://www.labourhire.qld.gov.au

If you need additional advice on these services, you can contact your local agriculture workforce officer: https://www.business.qld.gov.au/industries/farms-fishing-forestry/agriculture/agribusiness/agriculture-workforce-advice

If employing staff from outside your region, you may need a Health Management Plan, depending on your state or territory, and the evolving regulations on this.

If recruiting from interstate, be aware of how to access border closures. See Section 8.3 below for access via border closures and where some regions are also closed.

Also see section 8.3 below on resources for non-resident workers.

Preparing for a positive case

- If someone has had contact with an infected person, they will be required to self-quarantine in their accommodation for 14 days since last contact with a confirmed case.

- If the employee becomes unwell themselves during the self-quarantine, they should seek immediate medical advice.

- If a worker tests positive for the virus, the farm owner/manager will be contacted by the health department to establish if anyone else has had contact with this employee.

- The farm business is advised to consider advising staff in advance how they are to report illness.

- All employees are to immediately report any symptoms of COVID-19 or if they have had any contact with a person who has tested positive to the virus.

- The farm business will need to also consider its policy, plan or required actions when a staff member or the health department advise that a positive detection has occurred.

This will include:

- transport from the site to appropriate accommodation or health facility;

- contact tracing of potentially impacted staff;

- increased hygiene and cleaning of surfaces, equipment and break rooms, toilets and hygiene stations which may have been used or accessed by the staff member while infectious;

- review of other staff that share the same accommodation and the potential for quarantining of impacted staff in that accommodation, if required; and

- any actions based on Queensland Health advice.

7. If a worker suspects they have COVID-19

If a worker presents with symptoms of the virus (flu-like symptoms such as fever, a cough, sore throat, fatigue and shortness of breath):

- Isolate the worker immediately and remove from the workplace as soon as possible.

- Suggest they take the coronavirus quiz available at:

  https://www.qld.gov.au/health/conditions/health-alerts/coronavirus-covid-19/novel-coronavirus-quiz

- Recommend to the worker that they seek immediate medical advice.

- If the worker had close contact with someone with the virus, they should call ahead to a GP or emergency department advising of close contact, so they can prepare for the visit.

- Collect basic information from the worker to assist in determining other workers that they may have recently come into contact with including:

  o when they last attended a shift,
  o when they started experiencing symptoms, and
  o names of other employees they may have had contact with.

- If a worker is confirmed to have COVID-19, the Health Department will advise what they and you need to do.

- Inform co-workers about possible exposure, but maintain confidentiality.

- Advise workers to seek immediate medical advice if they develop symptoms or are concerned about their health.

- Any employee that may have come in close contact with an employee confirmed with COVID-19 will be advised to self-quarantine.

- Immediately sterilise all areas the employee may have come into contact with.

- You can request that an employee who was diagnosed with the virus provide a clearance certificate from their doctor before they return to work.

8. Government Assistance

Familiarise yourself with the relevant government support measures including:

- financial assistance,
- information on human resource matters (such as workplace obligations and workers' compensation), and
- resources for farm businesses, including
    - information for non-resident workers (such as visa arrangements and translated resources), and
    - access through border closures

8.1   Financial support

Australian Government support for farm businesses

Job Keeper Payment scheme: If your business has been impacted by COVID-19 you will be able to access a wages subsidy of $1,500 per eligible employee to continue paying them. https://treasury.gov.au/coronavirus/jobkeeper

Boosting Cash Flow: The Government will guarantee 50 % of new loans issued to SMEs: https://treasury.gov.au/coronavirus/sme-guarantee-scheme

Instant Asset Write-off: The instant asset write-off threshold was increased from $30,000 to $150,000: https://www.business.gov.au/risk-management/emergency-management/coronavirus-information-and-support-for-business/increasing-the-instant-asset-write-off

Accelerated Depreciation: Depreciation deductions of 50% of the cost of eligible assets: https://treasury.gov.au/coronavirus/business-investment

Other

- Temporary relief for financially distressed businesses:
https://treasury.gov.au/coronavirus/businesses#financialdistress
- Supporting apprentices and trainees:
 https://www.australianapprenticeships.gov.au
- Early access to superannuation
https://www.ato.gov.au/Individuals/Super/In-detail/Withdrawing-and-using-your-super/COVID-19-early-release-of-super/

State Government Support

Each State has provided various forms of payroll tax relief.

- **Queensland** Payroll tax relief package:
https://www.business.qld.gov.au/running-business/employing/payroll-tax/lodging/coronavirus-tax-relief
- **NSW** Payroll tax measures:
 https://www.nsw.gov.au/news/health-boost-and-economic-stimulus
- **WA** Deferred payment 2019-20 payroll tax:
https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/department-of-the-premier-and-cabinet/covid-19-coronavirus-business-and-industry-advice

Other Financial Support

Queensland:
- A loan to retain employees and maintain your operations up to $250,000:
Queensland COVID-19 job support loans: https://www.business.qld.gov.au
- $500 rebate off energy bills for SMEs:
Small and medium business power bill relief: https://www.business.qld.gov.au/

WA:
- Grants to small businesses: One-off grants of $17,5000 to small and medium businesses: https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/department-of-the-premier-and-cabinet/covid-19-coronavirus-business-and-industry-advice

NSW:
- None as of 24 April 2020

8.2 Information on Human Resource Matters

Workplace Obligations

The Fair Work Ombudsman has provided current details on HR matters, i.e. workplace obligations for employers and entitlements for employees in regard to the outbreak of COVID-19. Included is current information about stand downs from work, flexible work arrangements, workplace health and safety, and pay and leave entitlements: https://coronavirus.fairwork.gov.au/ or by phone on 13 13 94.

That site includes information on the Fair Work Commission's variation of 99 awards to provide employees with two weeks unpaid pandemic leave: https://coronavirus.fairwork.gov.au/coronavirus-and-australian-workplace-laws/flexibility-in-workplace-laws-during-coronavirus/unpaid-pandemic-leave-in-awards and the ability to apply to take annual leave at half pay.

Workers' compensation

Compared to work related injuries, it is more difficult to prove that a disease was contracted in, or caused by, particular employment. Workers' compensation schemes are governed by each State and Territory:

Workcover Queensland: https://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/claims-and-return-to-work/novel-coronavirus-covid-19-faqs/employer-faqs
NSW State Insurance Regulatory Authority: https://www.sira.nsw.gov.au/
NT WorkSafe: https://worksafe.nt.gov.au/
WA WorkCover: https://www.workcover.wa.gov.au/

8.3 Resources for Farm Businesses

Information regarding Non-Resident Workers

Visas

The banana industry relies heavily on non-resident workers. Recent changes to temporary visa arrangements will help growers continue to employ non-resident workers that are needed. This secures Australia's banana supply during COVID-19.

Those in the Seasonal Worker Programme and Pacific Labour Scheme and can now continue to work in agriculture and food processing for up to 12 months.

Working Holiday Makers who work in agriculture or food processing will be exempt from the 6-month limit on work with the one employer and eligible for a further visa to keep working in these critical sectors, if their current visa is due to expire in the next 6 months.

Advice regarding visa extensions for working holiday makers is at: https://covid19.homeaffairs.gov.au/staying-australia#11

All non-resident workers, including particularly backpackers staying in hostels are subject to home confinement and should only leave the premises for the permitted purposes and must observe social distancing.

Translated resources

Information required to be known by all staff including non-english speaking ones is translated at this site: https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/covid-19/Pages/covid-19-english.aspx?lang=english

Also, COVID-19 resources including fact sheets, guidelines and other publications in other languages are at: https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/translated-coronavirus-covid-19-resources

Border Closures

Queensland Border: Information about Queensland state border access restrictions: https://www.covid19.qld.gov.au/government-actions/border-closing. You can also read the Chief Health Officer directive on border closures Chief Health Officer directive on border closures https://www.health.qld.gov.au/system-governance/legislation/cho-public-health-directions-under-expanded-public-health-act-powers/border-restrictions announced 11 April, 2020.

Access to Cape York, from 17 April, 2020: https://www.qld.gov.au/border-pass

WA has both border and regions closed: https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/department-of-the-premier-and-cabinet/covid-19-coronavirus-advice-travelling-and-around-western-australia

NT Border: https://coronavirus.nt.gov.au/community-advice/border-controls

9. Other Useful Links

COVID-19 Latest News Australian Government https://www.health.gov.au or https://www.australia.gov.au/

Qld Latest News https://www.covid19.qld.gov.au/

NSW Coronavirus Rules https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/what-you-can-and-cant-do-under-rules

WA Government https://www.wa.gov.au/government/covid-19-coronavirus

NT Government https://coronavirus.nt.gov.au/

Coronavirus Essential Information – Qld Government https://www.business.gov.au

Coronavirus and Food Safety:
https://www.foodstandards.gov.au/consumer/safety/Pages/NOVEL-CORONAVIRUS-AND-FOOD-SAFETY.aspx

Safe Food Production Queensland: https://www.safefood.qld.gov.au/covid-19-advice/

NSW Government Food Authority https://www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au/help/covid-19-advice-for-businesses

NFF COVID-19 Workplace Guide, 31 March 2020 https://farmhub.org.au/covid-19-nff-workplace-guide/