

## **U.S. Seed Industry Impacts of COVID-19**

The U.S. seed industry stands with the entire agriculture and food value chain in its commitment to ensure ongoing access to a healthy, safe and affordable food supply as we continue to deal with the impacts of COVID-19.

ASTA has a COVID-19 news page on our website, which is continually being updated as new information of importance to the seed industry emerges. The website is: [www.betterseed.org/covid-19/](http://www.betterseed.org/covid-19/).

ASTA is closely monitoring the global pandemic and impacts on the seed industry both domestically and globally. Below are the association's responses to the International Seed Federation's (ISF) survey of national seed associations.

### **Are you experiencing any seed shortages at country and regional levels?**

- So far, the U.S. seed industry is not seeing any seed shortages at the national or regional level. The home garden seed sector is seeing a huge spike in demand for product, and companies are working hard to keep up with that unprecedented demand.

### **Are you experiencing any restrictions and non-tariff measures that hinder the production and/or international movement of seeds (phytosanitary issues, import/export bans, political and economic sanctions)?**

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) remains able to provide import and export services, issue permits and phytosanitary certificates. APHIS mail operations at major facilities are only operating on Tuesdays and Thursdays. APHIS requests everyone to send documents electronically as much as possible.

### **Have you experienced any unusual events (liquidity problems, supply chain disruptions, labour movement restrictions and shortages, NGO actions etc..) that impact seed production, breeding and trade?**

- **Seed Testing:** ASTA recently conducted a [survey of all state regulatory and commercial labs](#) to determine their status. Many have reported that their output will be slowed due to reduced staff, limiting contact space between employees and/or limited hours of operation. Of the 63 labs that responded, 90% are still operating, although some of the regulatory labs have limited accepting service samples. Most are not conducting field sampling, though. Most of the commercial labs are available for additional samples. All have set up drop-off programs for samples at their location to limit employee exposure. The Association of Official Seed Certifying Agencies reports Certification programs are operating as usual, but some states will have some variances.
- **Agricultural Labor:** ASTA is continuing to engage with the USDA and the U.S. State Department to ensure visas for the H-2A agricultural visa program are continuing to be processed. There currently have not been any issues at the U.S./Mexico border for farm workers crossing the border, but any

border closure for laborers would be a major issue.

- **Land Borders:** Movement of seeds across the U.S. borders to Canada and Mexico is still permitted. The movement of people across the two borders is restricted to essential business only.
- **Trucking:** The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) issued an emergency declaration which provides hours-of-service regulatory relief to commercial vehicle drivers transporting emergency supplies to deal with COVID-19. Seeds do not currently fall under the emergency declaration, but the FMCSA is actively considering adding seeds to any future expansions of the declaration. There are some concerns about truck driver shortages both domestically, and for cross-border movement between Canada and Mexico.
- **Ocean shipping:** Sailings continue to be cancelled or delayed due to decreased demand for products entering the United States, and a reduced flow of cargo from China. All port operations and related transportation are considered essential critical infrastructure. All major port authorities in the U.S have contingency plans in place if one of their workers is diagnosed with COVID-19.
- **Air freight:** ASTA has discussed the challenges facing the seed industry with the global air courier companies. Some passenger flights are converting to cargo-only to increase capacity, but we expect significant freight rate surcharges for the time being.

**Some countries classified the food and agricultural industry as (in their nomenclature) 'essential critical infrastructure'. This means work can continue, and personnel and goods can move. The question is if you have this measure in your country and is seed part of it or not?**

Yes, in the U.S. seed is considered essential critical infrastructure.

- On March 16, President Trump issued updated [Coronavirus Guidance for America](#). This guidance states: "If you work in a critical infrastructure industry, as defined by the Department of Homeland Security, such as healthcare services and pharmaceutical and food supply, you have a special responsibility to maintain your normal work schedule. You and your employers should follow [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)] guidance to protect your health at work."
- On March 28, the Department of Homeland Security, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) released [updated guidance on critical infrastructure workers](#). In this guidance, seed is included in the critical infrastructure: "Employees of companies engaged in the production, storage, transport, and distribution of chemicals, medicines, vaccines, and other substances used by the food and agriculture industry, including seeds, pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, minerals, enrichments, and other agricultural production aids."
- In the U.S., states and local governments are the ultimate authority on what is considered essential infrastructure. While most are following the Federal guidance, it is not required. The purpose of

the guidance is to help state and local officials and to provide documentation for companies in their communication with state and local authorities.

- Because of the lack of clarity on what is captured in the guidance document, ASTA prepared a [memo for the seed industry](#) outlining what we consider to be included in the integrated seed sector. ASTA also distributed template letters for member companies to give to their employees so they could identify themselves as critical infrastructure workers. So far, the U.S. government has no plans to provide specific documentation for critical infrastructure workers or companies.

**Any initiative you took at the national level with the value chain or others to support the movement of seed, or any other best practices to be highlighted?**

- ASTA has participated in several initiatives at the national level to support the movement of seed, including advisory calls with the USDA, Department of Transportation, and Congress. The full details can be found online at the ASTA COVID-19 website, but a few highlights include:
  - (March 24) [Ag Value Chain letter](#) to 50 state governors clarifying that food and agriculture are critical infrastructure
  - (March 18) [Ag Value Chain letter](#) to President Trump, requesting support in ensuring a steady ag supply chain.
  - ASTA signed on to a [multi-association letter to the Federal Maritime Commission](#) urging ocean carriers to waive detention and demurrage fees when the situation is out of the shipper's control, including COVID-19.

**Any experience you would like to share with your colleagues regarding living/ working under confinement measures?**

- ASTA staff are working remotely during this pandemic. Phones are being forwarded and can reach staff at 703-837-8140, by calling individual extensions, or by email [info@betterseed.org](mailto:info@betterseed.org).
- ASTA members have shared some of the things they have done to allow for as much social distancing as possible in their facilities. Examples include:
  - As much of the staff as possible are working remotely.
  - Those that must have staff on location have started to add shifts to maintain social distancing.
  - Morning calls with all managers to keep them updated
  - Companies are concerned about transplanting as that requires close proximity to other people.

ASTA appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on behalf of the American seed industry. We look forward to continuing to work closely with government and industry partners at the state, federal and international levels to ensure the ongoing movement of safe, quality seed during these challenging times.