



DATCP is here to serve during COVID-19

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A commentary by Randy Romanski, DATCP Interim Secretary

On March 24, Governor Tony Evers directed the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) to issue a “Safer At Home” order, or [Emergency Order #12](#). This order directs all Wisconsinites to stay at home in order to slow the spread of COVID-19, with some important exceptions for essential businesses and activities. In this order, as in previous emergency orders, Governor Evers recognized what we all know: agriculture, and the extensive supply chain that goes along with it, is essential to a safe, abundant food supply and to our state’s economy.

In response to this public health emergency, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) is focused on two main goals: helping to keep food on Wisconsin shelves, and supporting the industries we serve. Through regular communication with our agricultural partners, we hear farmers loud and clear and are being responsive to ensure the safety and stability of the state’s food supply chain. Through our public-facing hotlines, we are also helping consumers protect themselves from price gouging, fraud, and scams during this confusing time.

We are using the authority available to us to serve the public as safely as possible. That includes:

- Even though much of our staff is working remotely, our agency remains available to work with our partners and the citizens of the state. Our public facing hotlines are staffed, and DATCP staff is responding to public inquiries via e-mail and phones.
- We are finding creative ways to interact with the regulated community. Essential inspection activities (like slaughter inspections, pasteurization checks, and others) are still being conducted in person with appropriate social distancing. Our staff are using technology whenever possible to answer questions from industry and post guidance.
- DATCP is also investigating price gouging complaints, thanks to the authority provided in the Governor’s executive order.

As we move through this public health emergency together, DATCP remains open for business and to serve as a resource. If you are a farmer or agribusiness owner, please work with your respective agricultural associations to compile your questions, comments, and concerns. A wide variety of groups are participating in weekly conference calls with DATCP leadership. These virtual gatherings are a platform for the agriculture industry to ask questions, share information with each other, and better understand the state resources that are available.

Our outreach has shown us that there is understandable anxiety over the impacts COVID-19 could have for all of us. One example are the rumors we’ve seen about milk disposal at a time when grocery stores and suppliers are working around the clock to make sure that dairy products are available to the public. Although DATCP and the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) were asked to develop guidance for farmers in the unlikely event that they must turn to emergency milk disposal as a last resort, it’s important to know that **we are not aware of any instances of that occurring in our state**. The dairy industry has also informed

us that it will continue with its efforts to redistribute milk in the supply chain and find another processor for it to avoid disposal.

DATCP will continue to work with our partners in the industry to try to calm anxiety, but we cannot do it alone. We are asking for farmers to communicate with each other and their associations to gather information, forward questions and quell rumors if they hear them. You can point to DATCP's website (datcp.wi.gov) or Governor Tony Evers' office (evers.wi.gov). If you encounter questions about what is an "essential business", visit WEDC's website at wedc.org/essentialbusiness. You can also access multiple state agency resources at Wisconsin.gov/COVID19. This page contains many helpful resources in one place, including links to DHS's guidance on sanitizing and hygiene, the Department of Workforce Development's (DWD) information on unemployment, and more.

COVID-19 is an unprecedented challenge that no one could have foreseen, especially after the challenging years Wisconsin agriculture has weathered recently. People in agriculture understand better than other industries the resiliency and tenacity it takes to navigate difficult situations like this one. As always, DATCP remains available to serve as a resource to the industry and the citizens of this state. We will move through this together.

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