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Cooperative Extension Publications

Bulletin #2517, Maine Maple Tours: Guidance During COVID-19



Information for COVID-19

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Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, many maple producers were forced to cancel open house events during the 2020 sugaring season for the safety of the producers and their customers. This caused a major loss in sales for many maple producers throughout the maple-producing region. While COVID-19 is likely to still be a concern for the 2021 sugaring season, we now have a better understanding of the virus and protective measures to keep everyone safe while staying open for business. Those measures and best practices are detailed in this guidance.



Maple Based Events face a unique problem for safe sales during the COVID-19 outbreak. Typically, these events can draw a large number of customers to the sugarhouse in a short period. Historically, those customers spend a significant amount of time on-farm for events like sugarhouse tours, pancake breakfasts, syrup tastings, and more. Developing and implementing safety guidelines during this time will keep sugaring families, staff, and customers safe at these events during this COVID-19 outbreak.

New protocols for sanitization, customer flow, and payment methods must be planned. Ultimately, the goal is to:

- maximize space between household groups (greater than 6 feet),
- minimize touchpoints, and
- implement systems to clean and disinfect areas of frequent contact.

Those plans then need to be clearly communicated to your customers. Below are recommendations for communicating with your customers.

Communication and Marketing to the Public (Pre-Arrival)

- Update your website and social media with clear communication about what customers can expect when at this event (see [Social Media Best Practices in Times of Crisis from Penn State](#)). If you are participating in Maine Maple Sunday™ be sure to update your [Maine Maple Producers Association](#) listing as well.
- Keep communication with the public positive.
- Show the community that you are using recommended practices for sanitation and distancing (e.g. avoid posting pictures from last year's event that show a sugarhouse packed with people, or other images of crowds).
- You must post signage stating that face coverings are required for both indoor and outdoor-only events.
 - [Guidance on Enforcing Face Covering Wearing in Public Settings](#)
- Instruct customers to stay home if they are feeling ill.
 - Consider sharing the [CDC Coronavirus Symptoms Checker](#)
- Clarify your hours, if you are taking orders for pre-packed products on-line or over the phone, and anything else critical to the success of your system. Pre-packing products for customers can greatly decrease the amount of time that people are on the farm at one time.
 - Specify special payment methods if applicable. (e.g. check and cards only.)
- Remember that most customers will be reassured by seeing that you are putting systems in place to keep them safe.

Determining the Safety of Entertainment Options (Pre-Planning)

When considering entertainment options to draw in customers, you will need to consider the level of risk inherent with that activity. Will it reduce customer flow and create crowded conditions? Will it involve people being inside, or needing to touch surfaces that several others are also touching? It will be up to you to evaluate whether you can create systems to minimize those risks, or whether it is safer to forgo certain activities this year.

- When you have selected potential activities, consider the Center for Disease Control's [Hierarchy of Control](#) in relation to the activity. This system guides you through evaluating if there are alternatives or adjustments to make the option less likely to spread the disease. For example, as opposed to letting families walk through the sugarhouse, rope off the opened door and let them look in, or move a small evaporator outdoors for boiling demonstrations.
- Consider a few contingency plans for likely possible scenarios. (If it rains, what will you do? If you get a rush of visitors, how will you handle the crowds?)
- To minimize your risk, you may choose to only offer maple products for grab-and-go sales.

Serving Food and Offering Samples

Serving food (such as breakfasts) on-site should be avoided. If you decide to offer on-site food, keep in mind the following:

- **If serving food to be consumed on site**, be sure to follow Maine CDC and Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) COVID-19 mandates and guidance. See the full [Food and Drink Guidance from DECD here](#).
 - For contact tracing purposes, maintain records of customers, including one customer name and contact information per party, the server of the table, and the date they were in the establishment, for at least 21 days. This does not apply to counter- and window-service without waitstaff.
 - Limit group party size (50 people indoors and 100 outdoors max capacity).
 - Ensure at least 6' between all parties and seating.
 - Share and enforce that guests may remove their facemasks only when seated.
 - Self-serve buffets are prohibited at this time. Buffets at which waitstaff serve customers are permitted. All staff and customers must wear face coverings while in the buffet area and physical distancing must be maintained to the greatest extent possible.
 - Customers at a bar or counter must remain seated; no standing service is allowed.
 - If offering outdoor meals, you must provide handwashing stations and toilet facilities.
 - Food trucks on site would have to follow the above guidelines.
- **If offering food (syrup) samples**, follow the current State of Maine mandates at this time. See the full [DECD Establishments with Seasonal Activities Guidance](#) here. Best practice for offering samples include;
 - Avoiding buffet/ self-serve food samples.
 - Have a masked staff member hand out samples from behind a sneeze guard.
 - Instruct guests to take their samples away from the collection area for tasting and reflecting.
 - Create an area away from the sample distribution area where groups can taste and maintain 6' from others.
 - Post signage that masks must be worn until groups are more than 6' from others.
 - Use of prepackaged food and beverages only is encouraged.
 - Have a staff member trained to safely and regularly clean and disinfect all tables or high-touch surfaces.

Parking and Welcome Area Layout (Day of)

- Put up barriers and [signage posting your policies](#) between your parking area and welcoming booth, plus barriers to keep the traffic flowing in one direction, minimizing person-to-person contact.
- Place the check-in far from the check-out area to prevent crossing traffic.
- Put markers every 6' on the ground, or along the barriers to designate space between customers, in case a line forms.
- Limit the total occupancy of indoor retail spaces to 5 customers per 1,000 square feet of shopping space. If physical distancing would be difficult in your layout, you should reduce that number.
- Provide a handwashing station at the entrance and at a few locations around the sugarhouse.
 - Customers should be instructed to wash/sanitize hands before entering that space, and before consuming any food products.
- Identify surfaces that visitors are likely to touch frequently (tent posts, baskets, bench edges, etc) and clean and sanitize (if possible) on a set schedule [using an approved sanitizer](#). Bathroom facilities should be sanitized on a regular and frequent schedule.
- Be sure to train your staff on these sanitization procedures.
- Maine guidelines limit the number of persons for outdoor gatherings to 100 people (50 indoors).
 - [Maine Outdoor Amusement Guidance](#)
- Make a plan for how you will limit the number of customers allowed into each of your spaces at one time. (Customers may have to wait in their vehicles until other customers leave.)
- Train staff to uphold these rules and create a plan for positively responding to potential confrontational customer interactions resulting from requests to wait in line or to wear a mask.
 - [COVID-19 De-Escalation Training](#).
- Encourage a flow where customers are welcomed in one location, enter the sales area on one side, then exit the area on the other side and pay separately. This will minimize interactions between customers who are entering and those who are exiting.
- Have products for sale near the parking area. This way customers who just want to buy products can avoid the more congested areas.
- Offer pre-orders by phone, e-mail, or online purchasing platform. Pre-pack those orders and have them ready for the customer to grab-and-go.

Checkout Options

- Have someone designated to handle money. Staff handling money and interacting with clients should wash their hands frequently, wear gloves, and a face covering.
- Keep the check-out area separate from the welcome area to minimize crowding.
- Encourage contactless payment options.
- Consider these checkout options:
 - **Drive-thru style checkouts.** Staff can load products into the trunk of customers' cars. Payment can be made through the car window.
 - **Plexiglass protected checkout.** Install plexiglass between staff and customers. [Sanitize the card reader often](#), on a set schedule, preferably after every transaction.
 - **Online payment.** By setting up an [online shopping and payment system](#), you can minimize these concerns. This does increase staffing needs to pull and prepare orders.

Liability and Due Diligence

- Be sure to check in with your insurance company to make sure that the activities that you have selected will be covered by your policy.
- Be sure to post the Maine Agritourism Liability sign prominently. Members can purchase these through the [Maine Maple Producers Association](#) for a discounted price, or from other vendors.
- During any season, be sure to do a safety walk-through before opening to the public to address tripping hazards, chemical storage, electrocution hazards, keys removed from the equipment and implements down, etc.
 - Other resources:
 - [Agritourism Safety Checklist](#)
 - [Managing the Safety Risks of Agritourism Farms](#)

Final Thoughts

While there is great potential for this event, all participating producers must take the risk involved seriously. Many producers may choose to minimize this risk by only offering maple products for grab-and-go sales only. Others may choose more involved entertainment options but must do so with careful planning. Developing those plans to **maximize space between people (greater than 6 feet), minimize touchpoints, and clean and disinfect areas of frequent contact** will ensure everyone's safety and a successful event.

If you have questions about your event planning process, do not hesitate to reach out to Jason Lilley at University of Maine Cooperative Extension for support at jason.lilley@umaine.edu or 207.781.6099.



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