

With COVID-19 we all really are “in the same boat”

In late June 2020, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in consultation with the Food and Drug Administration issued Interim Guidance for “Protecting Seafood Processing Workers from COVID-19” (IG-PSPW) (<https://tinyurl.com/ybr3d5w5>). As the seafood industry in Alaska has geared up for the summer pack, the number of cases of COVID-19 among seafood workers has increased.

According to Alaska Public Media, the number of COVID cases among “nonresidents in Alaska is now 129, about 70% of them seafood workers” (<https://tinyurl.com/y82vxyac>). To reduce the chances of the spread of the virus in relatively isolated areas where the processing plants are located, a 14-day quarantine program has been implemented for workers with testing taking place during the quarantine period.

The IG-PSPW says, “Strategies for preventing the introduction of COVID-19 into the worksite include screening for fever, symptoms of and exposure to COVID-19; staying at home and self-monitoring for symptoms for 14 days prior to initial entry to the worksite; testing for SARS-CoV-2 ... and cooperating with federal and SLTT health authorities to facilitate contact tracing if exposures or infections warrant such.”

The fact that these cases were found during the 14-day quarantine period suggests that the seasonal seafood industry has taken the experience of the year-round meat processing industry and retail food sector in the lower 48 states seriously.

As this column is being written, “at least 82 grocery store workers have died from COVID-19 and 11,507 have been infected or exposed to the virus in the first 100 days of the outbreak” (<https://tinyurl.com/y8vut6pv>). The number of deaths at the end of June certainly is greater than the 66 reported during the last week in May. Nationally, all US deaths attributed to the coronavirus is currently 124,000 and increasing. As the number of coronavirus cases grows in areas that reopened early, it is clear that the expected summer slowdown in the transmission of the disease is not following the pattern of the seasonal flu virus.

At this time, we have to wonder what the fall and winter will be like when we are all living and working in confined spaces. It appears to us that getting back to “normal” is not likely for the foreseeable future.

In this period of uncertainty, people still need food on a regular basis, so a portion of the population will have to be on the frontlines of the pandemic to provide the food we need. Farmers and ranchers will still need to grow the crops and raise the animals that are at the heart of the food system. While the daily work of many farmers provides them with more than adequate social distancing, many of their spouses, children, and wide range of relatives are working in frontline industries that link the food they produce to the consumers who eat the food.

If we are to survive this challenge with a minimum of deaths, each and every one of us will need to be more serious about taking the necessary precautions to slow and eventually halt the transmission of the disease. Wearing masks, maintaining social distancing, and sheltering in place have nothing to do with culture wars and political perspectives. These precautions are a matter of public health and the more of us who take these actions, the safer we all will be.

Will the current recommendations be modified in the future? Certainly! As virologists, epidemiologists and a host of others study and learn more about this virus, the recommendations

will evolve. The current recommendations will undoubtedly be modified as the result of the new knowledge scientists discover about the behavior and characteristics of the virus.

Given the speed of the spread of the virus, the slow deliberative process of science is being put to the test. We need accurate information and we need it quickly and generally in scientific matters those two goals are in conflict. Typically, the peer review process that scientists use to validate their work often takes months and even years to establish certainty in the reliability of the ideas they share with the world. In the pressure to parse the details of the virus and the pandemic we are experiencing some inaccurate information will slip through the cracks. That does not mean that we should dismiss science. Rather we need to be prepared to modify our behavior based on the latest information, knowing that it may change as we learn more.

It is certain that we all will be safer if each and every one of us wears a mask each time we are in public. In doing so we make others safer and in turn by wearing a mask others make us safer. We also need to engage in social distancing when we are carrying out basic tasks like grocery shopping or serving as an essential worker. It is not a matter of doing one or the other; rather we need to both all the time.

In addition, we need to limit our exposure by reducing the number times we leave our homes. We will be safer if we call friends instead of hopping in the car to make a visit. We need to limit our close contacts to a small group of people and even then, we should follow the guidelines. The fewer people with whom we have direct and indirect links the safer all of us will be.

The two of us share a woodworking shop, but since the first recommendations for sheltering in place were announced we have met only once and even then, we stayed more than 6 feet apart. Is it inconvenient? Yes. Are we itching to get back to making sawdust and turning big boards into little ones? Yes. Is it worth it to increase the safety of family members? Yes!! And that is the whole point of quarantines, face masks, social distancing, and a whole set of what may seem like petty inconveniences.

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