



# Working Beef Cattle

## COVID-19 GUIDANCE

During the COVID-19 pandemic, producer groups who come together to work beef cattle can protect themselves and others from spreading the virus by changing their practices. No one wants one of their ranching memories (see Background History) to include a bout with COVID-19 or hospitalization.

WSDA offers the following recommendations to reduce your risk and spread of the disease.

### Remember the Big Five (from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

1. Practice social distancing by staying at least 6 feet away from each other.
2. Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for 20 seconds.
3. Cough or sneeze into a tissue and discard it in a waste receptacle.
4. Avoid touching your face, eyes, nose, and mouth.
5. Stay home if you are sick.

### Reduce Risk of Transmitting the Virus

- Do not carpool to any activities with people from different households.
- Work crew members should stay at least 6 feet away from each other, which may mean only one person performs a processing task at a time.
- The head catch operator may need to do all tasks typically done in a chute, or step 6 feet away while someone else does so.
- Workers should stick to one task and not trade or share tools or equipment, including banders, branding irons, syringes, tack, taggers, etc.
- Minimize the number of workers involved and do not allow bystanders.
- Don't shake hands; develop a greeting that works from 6 feet away.

*Photo 1. (Right) DON'T! This crew should wear nose and mouth covers, reduce the number of people near each other, and ensure at least 6 feet of distance from each other to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.*

### Background History

In the early days of beef ranching in the U.S., each ranch employed many ranch hands. They had dairy cattle and a parlor to harvest milk for the ranch owner and ranch hands, a mechanic, blacksmith, hand irrigators, horse trainers, and other specialized workers. Houses were often provided for married men and their families, with bunkhouses for single men. Each ranch might have Quarter Horses to work cattle, draft horses to work fields, and light harness horses to drive to town.

With the advent of cars, tractors, mechanical irrigation, and other agricultural technology and an increasing number of employment options for ranch hands, ranches transitioned to needing fewer employees. Even the largest ranches could be run with just a few year-round employees. However, most ranchers still need to call on ranching friends and neighbors in the spring and fall to help with tasks requiring a large number of hands. These tasks include moving cattle to seasonal pastures, pregnancy checking, branding, tagging, vaccinating, castrating, and/or weaning. Payment usually consists of an excellent meal, enjoyable conversation, strengthened friendships, and more good ranching memories.



## Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

- Everyone should wear a mask or bandana covering their nose and mouth. This is especially important while working cattle because it raises a lot of dust, which can carry disease-causing organisms.
- If you can't get disposable gloves, wear any kind of gloves (even leather). At the end of the day, put them in the sun and leave them alone for two weeks. Some Lysol® and Clorox™ pre-soak laundry products can be used on non-leather gloves.
- Wear back-up or extra footwear and clean it before leaving the cattle working area. Put footwear in a plastic garbage bag or clean bucket and disinfect at home. Or leave them in the sun for two weeks.
- Launder clothing worn at the chore day after arriving home, using effective laundry pre-soaks.
- Leave chaps in the sun for two weeks.

## Cleaning and Disinfection

- Tools, equipment, footwear, etc. must be cleaned before being disinfected. Cleaning means knocking off dirt and manure, scrubbing with soap and water, and rinsing with water. Then apply an effective disinfectant for the required contact time. If the surface is CLEAN, a solution of 4 teaspoons bleach to 1 quart of water applied for one minute is a simple and effective disinfectant against coronavirus. Disinfectants registered with the EPA that are proven effective against coronavirus are listed on EPA's COVID-19 webpage (List N).
- Disinfect vehicle seats, steering wheels, gear shifts, gauges, foot pedals, keys, and other surfaces after returning home.
- The host ranch should provide cleaning and disinfecting supplies. Figure 1 shows a simple and inexpensive portable hand-washing station. Use long-handled brushes to clean footwear.
- Leave tack, saddle blankets, ropes, and anything else hard to disinfect out in the sun for two weeks, if possible.
- Clean and disinfect all tools and equipment used during the work day, including taggers, banders, spurs, truck or tractor steering wheels, head catches, chutes, pens, record books, etc.
- Because farm chores result in dirty hands, do not rely on sanitizing gels to clean hands; use soap and running water.
- Wash hands when you arrive at the work site, anytime you take a break, before and after eating, before you leave, and when you get home.
- Use a paper towel to turn water spigot on and off and dispense soap.

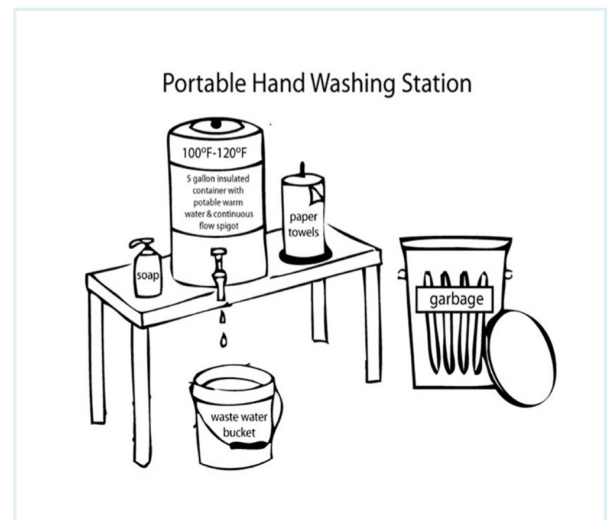


Figure 1. Low-cost portable handwashing station for remote locations. Replenish warm water as needed. (Illustration adapted from Kalamazoo (MI) County Environmental Health by Sarita Role Schaffer as published in Washington State University Extension FS257E, "Practical Biosecurity Recommendations for Farm Tour Hosts 2017").

## People Factors

- Anyone with asthma, emphysema, immunosuppression, or other underlying medical conditions should not help work cattle because it puts them at increased risk.
- Restrict helpers to those under age 60, if possible.
- Make sure no one who has a fever, is coughing, or has trouble breathing comes to the work day.
- Encourage all workers to blow their nose into a tissue and discard it in a waste receptacle before leaving.
- All workers should remove and launder clothing and take a shower after returning home.
- Delay community meals until a later date when both the end of seasonal processing chores and conquering of COVID-19 can be celebrated.

Adapted from "Spring cattle work calls for COVID-19 precautions," by L. Forero, S. Barry, J. Davy, and G. Maier, April 6, 2020.