

Maintaining the Essential business status for the grape and wine sector

On 25 March 2020, Agriculture Minister David Littleproud made a statement saying Australia's food production and supply chain will not be affected by coronavirus shutdowns. As far as the Commonwealth is concerned, food production and supply is an essential service.

That means State-imposed border shutdowns will not affect agricultural supply chains. The trucks carrying food and produce will get through to the shops. Feed, hay, fertilizer and other agriculture products will continue being delivered to farms.

Maintaining food production, access to workers, agricultural supply lines, transportation and logistics is absolutely critical and will not be affected by any of the measures aimed at curbing the virus's spread.

In order to maintain, our essential business status, particularly if future restrictions are imposed, our businesses must demonstrate that they have in place measures to appropriately manage the risk to workers and the community.

All grape and wine businesses should have a risk management plan in place. A good starting point for this can be found here in this document and associated documents, and in the New Zealand approach. While our rules may differ I would encourage businesses to look at <https://www.nzwine.com/media/15448/guidelines-for-winegrowers-operating-as-an-essential-business-v2-26-march-2020.pdf> to see if your business can meet these requirements. If we are required to enact risk plans by law we will review this advice.

General food safety advice

Everyone should practise good hygiene when preparing and handling food.

WHO has issued [precautionary recommendations](#) including advice on good hygiene practices during food handling and preparation, they include:

- washing hands before handling food, and between handling raw and cooked foods
- thorough cooking and proper handling of meat products
- covering your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing
- avoiding close contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness, such as coughing and sneezing.

As an added precaution, if you have suspected symptoms of respiratory illness you should avoid preparing food for other people and seek medical attention.

Advice for businesses

It's important for food businesses to be extra vigilant with all aspects of health and hygiene, to ensure no-one contaminates the surfaces in your food service or processing environment because of illness or unclean habits.

Good hygienic manufacturing practices and thorough cooking for cooked products will minimise the risk of transmission and meet food safety requirements.

How do I prevent people in my business transmitting the virus?

Normal best-practice prevention measures will reduce the risk of transmitting COVID-19, as for foodborne illnesses like norovirus and salmonella. These measures include practising good personal hygiene, having clean hands and clothes, keeping things clean and sanitised, excluding ill workers, and other recommended measures such as social distancing. Further details on these are provided below.

Can wine transmit COVID19?

Questions have been raised about the dangers of the virus in juice from pickers/handling/cellar activities. We understand that the virus COVID-19 would not be a risk to wine and juice products being derived from grapes potentially contaminated by coughing. Although corona viruses can survive in the environment for up to 3-6 days. Once the processing of grape products starts they would be destroyed and diluted immediately to a level that would not pose a risk to consumers.

A chance contamination by a person picking grapes is possible, but it unlikely to lead to transmission along the supply chain, as each step in the winemaking process dilutes the risk to some degree (however we definitely should not have anyone who is symptomatic or has other risk factors involved in any part of the process).

At the harvesting stage, there is a risk of transmission. We would not recommend tasting grapes from a bin, for example, as this has the grapes could possibly carry the virus. However, as parcels of grapes are added to the total volume of grapes used for crushing, the viral component is diluted, which means the changes of ingesting viable virus is reduced significantly.

During the production process, the likelihood of juice, must or wine transmitting the virus is relatively low. Juice is relatively acidic, and therefore is not a good environment for the virus to live. Further to this, Once the wine has begun fermentation the environment for virus particles is even more hostile and by this stage the chance of ingesting viable viral material would be reduced essentially to zero.

How can I properly clean and sanitise my equipment and facilities?

Cleaning and sanitising, particularly all food contact surfaces, is critical.

General cleaning should continue as normal (e.g. using hot water and detergent) and additional cleaning and sanitising of all food contact surfaces is recommended. Regular cleaning and sanitising of frequently touched surfaces such as door handles, light switches, trolley jacks, work benches, equipment and any other surface identified by the business should be implemented.

All eating and drinking utensils and food contact surfaces must be clean and sanitised before use.

For sanitising, current advice is that coronavirus is destroyed by hot water (e.g. by dishwashers operating above 60°C), or by commercial sanitisers normally used (e.g. sodium hypochlorite, hydrogen peroxide, and 70% ethanol). No change in concentration or exposure times is needed. Follow manufacturers' instructions.

AWRI Sanitation Guide

On Friday, the AWRI released advice on sanitation in a winery in response to the possibility of the virus. Given the possibility of transmission of SARS-CoV-2 via surfaces, cleaning of surfaces followed by disinfection is a best practice measure for prevention of spread of COVID-19. Note that cleaning typically involves removing dirt, grime and impurities from surfaces which can then be treated with a disinfectant to kill any virus particles. Due to the fact that the SARS-CoV-2 virus consists of a lipid membrane (which contains genetic material) with proteins embedded, soaps and detergents are not only effective in removing dirt and grime but should also decrease the viral load on a surface.

https://www.awri.com.au/information_services/ebulletin/2020/03/27/winery-sanitation-and-covid-19/

Is soap and water enough for hand washing?

Handwashing is also critical to reducing spread of the virus – businesses should ensure adequate facilities are provided and ensure food handlers thoroughly and frequently wash their hands. Normal soap and warm running water is adequate for hand washing. Hand sanitisers can be used as an added measure but should not replace hand washing.

Persons wearing gloves should be mindful that gloves are clean and changed as necessary, and hands are washed between changes.

What if someone on my business premises is unwell?

Health and hygiene responsibilities for food businesses and handlers have always required that all practicable measures must be taken to prevent contamination of the food service or processing environment. Food handlers must tell their supervisor if they have, or think they have, contaminated food in any way. Food handlers who know or suspect they are unwell or are suffering from symptoms of illness including sore throat, cough and fever must report this to their supervisor. Unwell food handlers need to be excluded from food handling activities or from the workplace entirely until they are professionally deemed safe to return to work (as per guidance from health authorities).

If multiple staff are directed to be quarantined and this affects operational capacity, the business will need to consider its own contingency plans for disposing of raw materials (especially fresh ingredients), any work in progress, or short shelf-life stock to ensure food safety is maintained.

You should also exclude other people you know are unwell, particularly from food handling areas (e.g. tradespeople entering your premises). Members of the public have an obligation to stay at home while displaying any symptoms such as sneezing or coughing.

See fact sheets on health and hygiene requirements for [food businesses](#) and [food handlers](#).

The Australian Government Department of Health has further [specific guidance](#) for employers.

What other precautions do I need to take?

- Make sure you and your staff are aware of the COVID-19 situation and take it seriously.
- Make sure staff are well trained to meet health and hygiene requirements.
- Effectively supervise all areas where food is exposed to ensure it is not contaminated, or removed if it is contaminated (or suspected to be).
- Social distancing is recommended - follow current health instructions. Businesses could consider positioning all people on the premises (including food handlers and customers) to be an appropriate distance apart to reduce the risk of transmission.

Where can I find more information?

NSW Food Authority - [Advice for Food Businesses](#)

Safe Food Production Queensland - [COVID-19. Advice for Food Businesses](#)

Latest COVID-19 updates – see the Australian Government Department of Health [website](#).

Food safety requirements – the requirements of Standards 3.2.2 and 3.2.3 apply to all Australian businesses and are on our [website](#). Guidance for meeting the requirements is in [Safe Food Australia](#) (our guide to the food safety standards) and [InfoBites](#) fact sheets.

Food safety enforcement and compliance – Australian state and territory health authorities and New Zealand Ministry for Primary Industries are responsible for enforcement and compliance of the Food Standards Code. Contact details are available on this [website](#).

Australian workplace laws - see Fair Work Ombudsman [website](#).