

By [**The Grower-Shipper Association of Central-California**](#)

While farmers and farming companies have worked diligently to protect employees and continue to supply fruits and vegetables to consumers during this pandemic, our region has been dealt another blow with wildfires which are now significantly impacting our area. The challenges farmers face seem never greater than what we have seen in 2020.

As part of crucial efforts to protect farm employees, there is some cross-over between wildfire and COVID-19 practices. The wearing of face masks and facial coverings provides some limited protection from smoke and ash for essential employees. However, there are regulations in place that mandate N95 masks are made available to employees working outside if air quality reaches an unhealthy level.

Agricultural commissioners in our region have already distributed thousands of N95 masks for use by farm workers over the last few days. County officials, agricultural industry leaders, which include the Grower-Shipper Association of Central California (GSA), and the California Department of Food and Agriculture have requested additional N95 respirators for farm workers in our area.

As a result of this request, approximately 100,000 N95 respirators have been secured through California's Office of Emergency Services for distribution to employers for farm workers throughout the Salinas Valley. Similar allotments have been sent to ag commissioners' offices throughout California to support protective efforts.

GSA is also providing information to its members about regulatory standards in place to protect outside workers during periods of unhealthy air quality to assist them in implementing mandatory practices during these wildfires. Workplace safety has remained at the forefront throughout the pandemic, but farmers and farming companies know they must also prioritize exposure mitigation measures in place to help protect employees from wildfire smoke.

Another continual priority for our region's farmers is food safety. As wildfires have become more prevalent, studies and analysis have been done regarding their impact on produce safety. One study published in 2018 from U.C. Cooperative Extension titled "[Produce Safety After Urban Wildfire](#)" explored the impact of smoke from 2017 fire events onto local Sonoma County produce. Based on preliminary findings the report states "*...produce safety was not significantly affected by the fires and may be mitigated by washing produce.*"

Farmers and their employees are continually assessing and monitoring their crops and fields for any safety or quality issues which may result during the growing season. Farmers and their families eat what they grow so food safety is prioritized each and every day even as they navigate a pandemic and wildfires.

We are a resilient industry with dedicated farmers and farm employees. But 2020 is testing everyone's resolve and we must lean on each other and protect each other during these unprecedented times.

This article originally appeared on [The Grower-Shipper Association of Central-California's website](#).