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Disclaimer: The authors of this document have made every effort to ensure that it is accurate at the time of publication. Given how rapidly the COVID-19 pandemic response is evolving, we strongly recommend that you check the websites of the Maine Dept. of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, the Maine Dept. of Labor, and the U.S. Dept. of Labor regularly for the latest information. This document does not provide legal advice or create an attorney-client relationship.

## **What Farms Need to Know: COVID-19 Employee Sick Time and Leave**

### **What do I do if my farm employee or employee's family member becomes ill during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

First, take steps to ensure that your employee is safe and the rest of your staff is protected. You should follow public health guidance provided by the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) and the [Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

If your employee or their family member becomes ill or needs other care, your employee will need to take leave from work. The employee has some options for leave under Maine law. In addition, he or she may be eligible for paid sick or family leave under recently passed federal law. You will be fully reimbursed for the expense of this leave by the federal government.

### **What sick leave is available to my farm employees under state law?**

Under Maine law, the following provisions may apply to your employees. If you provide paid or unpaid sick leave for your employees, you should notify them about how they can use their sick time during the pandemic.

*Maine's Employment Leave for Caregivers and Persons Affected by Public Health Emergencies:* An employee who is affected by a public health emergency or caring for an immediate family member who is affected are eligible for leave, which can be paid or unpaid depending on your farm's leave policy.

*Maine's Family Medical Leave:* An employee who has worked for your business for at least 12 consecutive months is entitled to up to 10 weeks of job-protected, unpaid leave to care for employee's or family member's serious health condition. If your business has fewer than 15 employees, you are exempt.

*Maine's Family Sick Leave:* If you provide paid leave to your employees, then an employee must be allowed to use that paid leave for the care of an immediate family member who is ill.

You may have heard that Maine recently passed a new paid sick leave law. That law will go into effect in 2021 and does not apply at this time. See more details on [Maine leave laws](#) from the Maine Dept. of Labor.

### **What sick leave is available to my farm employees under federal law?**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Congress recently passed new laws, including the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) and the CARES Act. These laws provide new emergency paid sick leave and expanded family and medical leave that could apply to your employees and be fully reimbursed by the federal government, in addition to any paid or unpaid sick leave that you provide to your employees already.

*Paid Sick Leave for Employee Illness:* Your employees are eligible for this leave when an employee is unable to work because he or she is quarantined and/or experiencing COVID-19 symptoms and seeking a medical diagnosis. It provides two weeks (up to 80 hours for full time employees) of paid sick leave at the employee's regular rate of pay (or the minimum wage, if it is higher), OR

*Paid Sick Leave to Care for Family Member:* Your employees are eligible for this leave when an employee is unable to work because he or she needs to care for a quarantined family member or a child whose school or child care provider is closed due to COVID-19. It provides two weeks (up to 80 hours) of paid sick leave at two-thirds the employee's regular rate of pay (or the minimum wage, if it is higher), AND

*Paid Expanded Family and Medical Leave:* Your employees are eligible for this leave when an employee who has been employed for at least 30 calendar days needs to care for a child whose school or childcare provider is closed or unavailable for reasons related to COVID-19. It provides up to an additional 10 weeks of leave at two-thirds the employee's regular rate of pay (or the minimum wage, if it is higher).

An employee can combine 2 weeks of sick leave and up to 10 weeks of family and medical leave for a total of 12 weeks of paid leave.

Note that part-time employees are eligible for paid leave for the number of hours that they would ordinarily work during the leave period.

### ***How do I know if this applies to my farm?***

The provisions apply to employers with less than 500 employees. However, you may be able to apply for an exemption available for small businesses. Under this exemption, your business would not have to provide (a) paid sick leave due to school or childcare closures for COVID-19 related reasons and (b) expanded family and medical leave due to school or childcare closures for COVID-19 related reasons.

To claim this exemption, you need to prove that providing this leave would "jeopardize the viability of [your] business as a going concern." An authorized officer of your business must

determine that (1) providing this leave would be such a burden on your business expenses that you would cease operating; OR (2) the employee's special skills or knowledge are such that their leave would put the business's financial health or operational capabilities at risk; OR (3) there are not other workers able to perform the services of the employee requesting leave, so that your business could not continue to operate. You can find more details about this exemption on the [U.S. Dept. of Labor's COVID-19 information page](#).

### ***How will my farm business pay for this leave?***

This federal government will fully reimburse you wages you pay during employees' sick leave or expanded family and medical leave. To be reimbursed for this expense, you can:

- *Claim a tax credit:* If you plan to claim a tax credit for your payment of sick leave or expanded family and medical leave wages, be sure to retain appropriate documentation in your records. Consult the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) for forms, instructions, and information about the procedures claiming this tax credit.
- *Apply for a Small Business Administration 7(a) Loan:* You can apply for a SBA 7(a) Paycheck Protection Program loan to cover payroll, health care costs, and other business expenses. These loans are eligible for forgiveness up to the total amount of payroll payments, interest payments on mortgage obligations, rent payments, and utility payments in an 8-week period following loan origination.
- *Reach out to the Farm Services Agency:* You may also want to check with the FSA in Maine about loan options during this time, particularly if you have an existing relationship.

### **Useful Resources**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the government response are changing rapidly. We suggest that you consult the following websites regularly for the latest information.

U.S. Dept. of Labor: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/pandemic>

Maine Dept. of Labor FAQs: <https://www.maine.gov/labor/covid19/>

Maine Dept. of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry: <https://www.maine.gov/dacf/>

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

Maine Center for Disease Control & Prevention: <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/infectious-disease/epi/airborne/coronavirus.shtml>