



OREGON
ASSOCIATION OF
NURSERIES

**Comments before Joint Special Committee on Coronavirus Response
Relating to impact of public health policies on the nursery industry economy**

By Jeff Stone, Executive Director, Oregon Association of Nurseries

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Co-Chairs Senator Roblan and Representative Holvey, members of the committee, my name is Jeff Stone and I serve as the Executive Director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the issue of commonsense policy relating to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) health crisis. The OAN applauds Governor Brown and Oregon's legislative leadership and their efforts to provide decisive actions to reduce the spread of the virus in our state.

The nursery and greenhouse industry have always done business on a handshake. Employees work shoulder to shoulder to produce top quality plants at their nurseries, and nursery leaders likewise work hand in hand to move the industry forward. That is our tradition. The emergence of the COVID-19 in the United States might very well fundamentally change the physical interactions and mechanics of our industry. We are up to the challenge and must all do our part to flatten the curve of exposure through common sense measures that limit the avenues of spread. Since the outbreak, the association has been providing up to the minute relevant resources and guidance to ensure the industry is safe. Our commitment to up-to-date information has generated the creation of a coronavirus resource page that can be accessed here:

<https://www.oan.org/coronavirus>

The economic footprint of the nursery and greenhouse industry

The nursery and greenhouse industry remain the state's largest agricultural sector, and the industry ranks third in the nation, with over \$996 million in sales annually to customers in Oregon, the rest of the United States, and abroad. Nursery and greenhouse economic activity accounts for almost a billion traded sector dollars back to Oregon.

In fact, nearly 75% of the nursery stock grown in our state leaves our borders – with over half reaching markets east of the Mississippi River. The Oregon nursery industry, including Christmas trees, employs an average of 9,150 workers in horticultural production, with a total annual payroll of \$332 million (Oregon Employment Department, 2018). Nursery workers earn an average of \$36,286 per year.

Nursery association members represent wholesale plant growers, Christmas tree growers, retailers, and greenhouse operators. Our members are located throughout the state, with our largest nursery growing operations found in Clackamas, Marion, Washington, Yamhill and Multnomah counties.

Timing of COVID-19 is during peak shipping season

There is no good time for a global health pandemic. Unfortunately for the association's growers, greenhouse and retail operators (and unlike other agricultural sectors), the spring season is the busiest time of the entire year. Thousands of trucks are loaded and shipped to customers across the country and globe. It is make or break time. For wholesale growers, Seattle is a large "local" market and we are already experiencing that market shut down with our perishable product with no destination to be delivered. Simply put, this is a critical time for the economic well-being of the industry.

Much of the shipping work is done outside and can easily adhere to proper social distancing. Without the ability for growers to take plants and trees from the field and ship them to customers, severe economic carnage will follow. Common sense would dictate that the grower community can adapt and safely operate during a health crisis and should not be curtailed.

Spring is a critical time for retail nursery operations

The retail component of the nursery industry is critical to the success of our sector as a whole, and for our retail community, sales are at a peak as spring turns into summer. For vast majority of my membership, sales for the year typically come from the eight-week time frame in April and May. Therefore, the survival of retail nursery operations and the continuing employment of their workers depends on these businesses being allowed to continue operating during this crisis. We ask that home supply and hardware stores, including nursery garden centers and big box stores, fall within the retail exemption for any future mandated closures.

Nursery employers are already taking measures to protect the workforce

The nursery and greenhouse industry are already suffering from a critical shortage of labor. In order to protect and continue to full employee the workforce, the OAN has encouraged all nursery employers to follow the following advice from health officials and legal counsel:

- Tell employees to stay home if they are sick.
- Tell employees you will send them home if they show up sick.
- Make employees aware that there is no penalty for taking leave they are entitled to by law, such as employee sick leave or leave taken through the Oregon Family Leave Act. Leave entitlement varies depending on the size of your business and whether you offer leave benefits that exceed the minimum legal requirements.
- Be particularly careful with workforce reductions (seasonal or otherwise).

Retailer safety precautions

The safety of the general public and our agricultural community is paramount to us. To that end, I have consulted with several retailers throughout the state and am pleased at the proactive nature of their activities to ensure the health of their employees and interaction with the general public:

1. A standard practice of enforcement with employees: If you are sick—stay home. If you arrive at work displaying any symptoms, you will be sent home.
2. Every store is cleaned and sanitized regularly—multiple times a day. These efforts are documented and being tracked. Examples of cleaning and disinfecting efforts include disinfecting all frequently touched surfaces including door handles, faucets, shopping cart handles, keyboards, phones, scanners, vehicle steering wheels and controls etc.
3. Retailers have made hand sanitizer, disinfecting solutions, latex gloves, and sanitizing wipes readily available to employees and customers. Signs have been posted encouraging and educating on proper hygiene processes to prevent the spread of pathogens.
4. If possible, retailers are being encouraged to open outdoor checkouts to allow customers to avoid having to enter a confined building.
5. Encouraging social distancing between both customers and fellow employees.
6. Cancelling all seminars and workshops.
7. Providing options for customers to phone in orders and either pick them up in a segregated area or have them delivered to their homes without personal interaction.

The OAN is aligned with business leaders to support employers and employees

Recently the OAN joined over a dozen business associations to express support of a plethora of actions to protect public safety during this health crisis. We support the letter in its entirety and would amplify critical issues that directly impact the nursery and greenhouse industry.

- Establish regular lines of communication between business and Oregon leaders to have regular updates and strategy discussions and create sector-by-sector response teams.
- Recognizing the cash-flow crisis facing businesses across the state, delay implementation of the new Corporate Activities Tax, at least for the first quarter of 2020, so those funds can be diverted to meeting payroll and protecting jobs. Extend the delay through the second quarter if the coronavirus crisis continues.
- Reduce in the weight-mile for trucking firms playing a critical role in delivering supplies and consider reduction in corporate minimum taxes.
- Extend tax filing deadlines.
- Ensure home supply and hardware stores fall within the retail exemption for mandated closures (this needs to include nursery garden centers and big box stores).

The nursery industry can help create a sense of normalcy for the public

Something that should not be dismissed during a time of public tumult is the tangible benefits that the nursery industry brings to Oregonians. Our products offer customers a way to avoid heavily populated public areas and shelter in place by working at home on outdoor projects. Such activity promotes both physical and mental health, the importance of which cannot be underestimated during this difficult time. Additionally, some of our products allow people to grow their own herbs, fruits and vegetables, giving families access to healthy food options and helping them to relieve financial stresses.

The needs and concerns of the nursery industry are unique

The OAN strongly urges the committee to consider the impact of sectors of the economy that are beyond the important contribution of general businesses. Agriculture is no different than many

manufacturers or distributors in their impact to bringing product to market and it is critical that the committee hear from the nursery industry regarding additional policy considerations. Down the road and with the continuation of logical social distancing measures in place, communities and neighborhoods will need an outlet to redeem some semblance of livability—something that the nursery and greenhouse industry can provide.

Thank you for your time and attention.