

Without a doubt, COVID-19 has largely impacted almost every industry in the United States, but when the pandemic first began, it became quickly apparent just how much our society relies on a consistent and safe food supply. I recall several instances where food supplies within my local town were considerably reduced and quite often, specific items were completely unavailable. To the average consumer, this may have reflected a store's inability to meet consumer demands, but from a few steps back, this was obviously a result of the dramatic market disruptions beyond product availability and labor. Although the pandemic certainly slowed down and even halted production of food during the initial local and state shutdowns, the choice to quit producing food for our communities and nation was never an option.

From both members of the agricultural industry and the general public, the role of essential and available labor quickly became a commonly understood and critical piece of the sustainable food chain puzzle. The small portion of individuals in America today that grew up growing and raising food sources for others may have already understood this fundamental piece of food production. However, others outside of the industry likely did not realize just how dependent food production is on available labor necessary for them to walk into a store and purchase items to feed and support their families. Although America's crop and livestock farmers are on the front lines of producing food for our nation, the U.S. food chain cannot be supported by farmers alone. We must also consider and respect the hard-working individuals across a multitude of systems such as processing plants, trucking systems, and grocery store workers to truly support farm-to-fork food production. Consequently, people who may not have been considered essential to our communities previously, were quickly deemed essential to our food

chain. As our nation continues to recover from the pandemic, it will remain critical to support and encourage others to join the essential members within the U.S. food supply chain.

Reflecting back to the beginning of the pandemic, companies and agricultural industry members were forced to adapt quickly to meet production and food supply demands during instances where processing plants were short on labor and either closed or operated at a reduced staff capacity,. Thus, the potential for technological advancements and efficiency within processing plans is likely to be an urgent area of emphasis and further development. Through the implementation of advanced processing systems, these systems will be much more prepared to respond to any market or labor disruption in the future such that they can still operate in an efficient and successful manner.

As our nation continues to recover from the countless impacts of COVID-19, we are presented with a tremendous opportunity for growth and advancements in the food production sector specifically. Many individuals initially embraced a world where meals were often cooked at home rather than ordered in from restaurants, which creates a great opportunity to provide simple and easy to use products that encourage consumers to continue cooking at home. Additionally, the closure and subsequent reduced capacity of large processing plants earlier this year encouraged producers to support and utilize local butcher shops. Thus, consumers were provided an easily accessible option to purchase locally produced meat. In the months and years ahead, the demand for safe and affordable protein sources may then increase if individuals continue to cook meals from home and support local farmers. Consequently, consumers will be able to support local farmers and may grow to respect the drive and passion that many American farmers possess for raising and providing safe food.