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Produce shipments unaffected by COVID-19, says veteran customs broker

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The Produce News spoke to Pat Compres of Advance Customs Brokers who has been on the front lines of facilitating produce trade during the disruptive situations presented by COVID-19.

PN: There has been a lot of press lately about disruptions in trade including port closures. Is this affecting produce shipments?

We haven't seen any affect on produce shipments. The announced port and other related closings and schedule changes are a result of decreased volume in shipping of non-food goods due to factory shutdowns. For example, Central America's textile manufacturing is on hiatus resulting in significant volume decrease in shipments from Central America and thus less need for the ports or carriers to maintain their full schedule.

Food and produce remain priority products as far as any restrictions are concerned. This is demonstrated by the fact that food-related businesses including the ports, carriers, truckers, customs brokers, logistics companies and supermarkets are exempt from the government-advised closures since they are deemed "essential businesses." All businesses dealing with the movement and delivery of food products are exempt from closing or sheltering orders applied in different states.

PN: Have you experienced any difficulty in trucking produce within the U.S.? Are trucking companies being negatively impacted by rest-stop closures or lay-offs, for example?

There are two aspects of this — local drayage and over-the-road trucking. We haven't experienced any issues with local drayage in picking up cargo from the ports. In fact, many of these companies are calling to ask if we have any cargo because with the non-food cargo volume being down, they are looking for more business.

As far as over-the-road trucks for produce, we haven't experienced any lag in service. In fact, in some cases the ELD (electronic logging) regulations have been relaxed for emergency movement of food and pharmaceutical products, benefitting truckers. We have seen some price gouging with trucking rates.

PN: You don't foresee a shortage of imported product then?

In my conversations with shippers all over the world, they all report that even though countries have closed borders and have shelter-in-place rules, anything having to do with agriculture is open. People in ag industries can work, pick, pack and ship. Those industries are allowed to operate and move. I don't foresee the flow of ag, food or produce being impacted. Now of course, that could change, we don't have a crystal ball. But for now, those are the conversations we've been having.

PN: What indications do you get from speaking to government agency, port or carrier representatives?

As far as government agencies go, they are saying it's "business as usual." Some of the agencies have had some employees off work because of kids being home from school but they've made up the difference with other personnel. FDA and USDA are operating normally. USDA has full capacity for pest ID and Customs & Border Protection is out in force. The ports and carriers have told us they remain committed to servicing all needs related to produce shipments. The discussion with the ports and terminals is more about the slow down in non-food cargo volume. So, some are staggering the days they are open but the majority of the ports are still working full-time.

PN: What should produce importers be doing or talking about with their customs brokers/logistics partners to be prepared?

Just like in non-crisis times, communication is always key. So stay in touch with your providers and be watching the information they send you since that will be specific to your business. The other major step they can take is to ensure they are implementing recommended best practices to prevent

their staff from becoming sick. They should prepare accordingly for having at least half the staff out of the office and always have a back-up plan. It's never too much to ask the question "are you prepared for this?"

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