



Safe Work and Return to Work Awards

Shane Webcke, Queensland Safety Ambassador

Safe Work and Return to Work Awards example entry Category twelve – Best response to the COVID-19 pandemic in work health and safety

1. How did COVID-19 affect your organisation's operations?

Queensland-based Australian Country Choice (ACC) is the world's largest, family-owned, vertically integrated cattle and beef supply chain. ACC is a major supplier of custom fed trade cattle and high-quality beef products to local and export customers.

With over 1200 employees, we operate both as an agricultural producer and a meat processor.

COVID-19 was initially, and still is a proven and serious risk to the Meat Processing Industry. At all levels from the health and wellbeing of its employees within a processing facility to the mental health of staff isolated by lock downs on remote and rural locations through to the commercial impact on the whole cattle and beef supply chain, from on farm producers, to domestic & export freight, to primary and further processors maintaining continuity of operations to ensure supply, to ensuring supply through to distribution centres and eventually through to retailers and customers.

At the height of America's first wave episode in May 2020, around 40% of US meat processing throughput was incapacitated – creating issues of human health and animal welfare as well as economic, commercial impacts on business continuity and export agreements.

This also led to a rapid rise in demand for Australian imported beef. The Australian domestic market also saw a 30% increase in consumer demand during the COVID-19 lockdown. This along with a number of high-profile processing plant closures and sharp falls in processing throughput in Australia, it was more critical than ever ACC ensure the health, safety & welfare of our people and our ability to maintain continual operations.

Fig 2: COVID-19 and its effect on throughput

ACC's initial response was focused on two critical (and heavily interdependent) challenges faced by our business, our people, and our customers:

1. The health, safety, and wellbeing of our employees
 - The intense nature of the work being performed within the processing facility – high volumes of people, in close proximity to each other and it being a prime environment for the spread of infectious disease like Covid.
 - High volume of individual thoroughfare through the processing facility.
 - Workforce demographics and high degree of cultural diversity:
 - Additional care and consideration for our culturally diverse and multi-lingual workforce.
 - Frequent participation of employees in out of work community events, gathering and cultural connections.
 - Concern for employees mental health and wellbeing for those with international family and connections to countries and communities being severely impacted by the pandemic and outbreaks overseas.
 - Impact of lock downs and further isolation of employees working on our properties, farms, and feedlots in remote and rural locations, with sometimes already limited connectivity.

2. Maintaining operational continuity

- Availability of specialised and skilled employees who were able to safely attend work during community and suburb lock downs, border closures, testing & self-isolation periods.
- Labour contingency required to accommodate increased unplanned absenteeism with any employees experiencing symptoms required to report, self-isolate, be tested and provide evidence of negative test prior to returning.
- Increase in operational costs through additional resources, PPE, and consumables.
- Infectious disease prevention and control mechanisms.
- Additional labour to meet increased domestic supply.
- Maintaining customer confidence in safely continuing to supply.
- Business continuity plans included animal welfare requirements to cater for appropriate treatment & handling of livestock in the event of a forced, unplanned disruption to production either at the processing facility or feedlots. Additional planning required for safe disposal of product meat from freezers to avoid any biological or contamination hazards.

Extensive additional safety protocols were instituted throughout our Queensland-wide operations in March 2020 as soon as the Australian and Queensland governments notified of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our first step was to conduct a thorough and systematic risk assessment and full operational analysis in our processing facility, properties, and feedlots. Our intent was to identify our every risk and possible opportunity for exposure, identify suitable control mechanisms and urgently implement the required changes to ensure we remained bio secure and operational. This immediate response in the early onset of the COVID-19 challenge resulted in additional work health & safety controls such as:

- Screening
- Workforce segregation
- Additional Personal Protective Equipment
- Contact tracing
- Manager and employee training
- Resources within the WHS team were increased and re-prioritised, starting with the additional administrative to support record keeping, to the appointment of four dedicated COVID-19 “marshals” throughout the food processing facility. COVID-19 Marshalls were empowered to ensure all staff, up to the most senior level observe the strict infection control protocols. ACC proactively engaged and invested in world renowned expert consultants, Dr Ian Norton, and the team at Respond Global and participated in the whole of industry and government bodies. Leadership was displayed at the outset with open and constant communication to all employees and included languages other than English. The senior executive team led by CEO Anthony Lee met routinely to identify risk and develop strategies to mitigate. ACC facilitated Covid Information Sessions and Webinars for support staff, supervisors, and managers with Respond Global focusing on Covid information, guidelines, myth busters and infectious disease and prevention.
- Heightened quality assurance across every touch point of the business.
- Mapping a full-scale contingency plan on preventing COVID-19 from entering our facility, feedlots, and properties.
- Establishing and implementing a gold-standard track-and-trace model at the processing facility.
- Collaborating with key industry bodies, external infectious disease experts, contributing to Food Safe Qld and reporting to Queensland Health.
ACC took additional precautions regarding isolation and staff coming to work who may have been at risk. In these circumstances ACC provided for paid absence so as not to disadvantage employees and to encourage the extra precautions and self-isolation. This sent a strong message that management was prepared to share the responsibility with all the workforce and reassured staff that they would be supported while doing the right thing for work colleagues and the wider community.

There were implications for overall staff well-being, with employees on properties in Far North, Central and Western Queensland being directed to lock down and forced to remain on station. ACC acknowledged that this necessary preventative and protective action was at risk of increasing these employees sense of isolation as it restricted their access to usual community, family, and friends for a short period of time. Many employees opted to cancel

their planned leave, to avoid being required to isolate or caught in a lock down and unable to return to the workplace. ACC responded by providing increased support to managers and information to support their awareness of the potential side effects of this risk mitigation strategy.

ACC participated in the pastoral industry group meetings which included Human Resource and Work, Health & Safety Leaders from across the major pastoral organisations, exchanging information, resources, best practice and response to isolation concerns and mental health initiatives.

2. Describe the health, safety and wellbeing strategies your organisation implemented to keep your workers and the community safe e.g. remote working, technical knowledge, availability of PPE, maintaining business viability. Include evidence if possible.

Screening

- Additional staff were employed at the entry point to the Cannon Hill plant to ensure thorough screening. They were given authority to use verbal questioning and objective temperature scanning and to refuse entry. This protocol is continuing.
- Every external service provider entering any ACC site is now required to complete a COVID19-contact declaration requiring collection, collation, and back-office administration. This documentation is continuously updated to accommodate changes in outbreaks and hot-spots.
- Temperature checking upon entry of every individual arriving at the Cannon Hill Facility using hand-held digital thermometers. It is estimated that, to date more than 150,000 temperature checks have been conducted. Anyone registering above 37.5 is asked how they are feeling, checking symptoms, and is followed by an additional temperature check approximately 5 minutes later. Anyone recording a temperature higher than 37.5 on the second reading was instructed to seek medical advice immediately. In this case, employees were required to be tested and provide a negative COVID test before returning to work.
- To limit the risk of COVID at any ACC work location, only essential staff, visitors, and contractors were admitted.
- Head Office managers and employees were unable to travel to other locations.
- Workforce segregation
- All divisions of ACC's corporate administration and management teams and operations were strategically segregated:
 - a. ACC established additional onsite functional office area and workstations to segregate critical support functions (e.g.: payroll) to ensure continuity of service in the event of an outbreak.
 - b. Deployment to work remotely wherever possible for administration and management staff.
 - c. Establishing external area outside of the office for safe document exchange and deposit of paperwork to minimise unnecessary contact.
 - d. All enclosed work areas and rooms were assessed for size and capacity to ensure adequate social distancing. Each room/area was signed to specify the room capacity and tables and seating was marked to inform social distancing.
- Preference to conduct electronic meetings versus face to face wherever possible.
- Production staff were prohibited from entering administration offices and vice versa.
- Shift and production times were adjusted to ensure clear segregation between morning and afternoon shifts.
- Rostered breaks were altered to ensure no cross-overs between departments.

- Teams were allocated to specific lunchrooms, locker rooms and staff facilities to reduce unnecessary crossover.
- The largest staff dining room facility at the processing plant underwent an overhaul, with the investment of \$40,000 for segregation panels in the central lunchroom and extra tables were fitted to ensure social distancing panels during the most vulnerable times when PPE was removed as staff were eating and drinking. Staff were allocated specified seating within their teams and workflow to minimise crossover and facilitate effective tracking and tracing.
- Hooks were installed in the lunchrooms for staff to hang their helmets and balaclavas to limit cross-contamination.
- A new designated smokers' area away was established that was away from common walking areas to reduce risk of air droplet transfer
- Non-essential seating was removed to minimise contact points that could not be traced.

Traceability

ACC felt particularly vulnerable in the event of a forced shut down. Unlike other meat processing companies, ACC was a standalone facility, so a forced shutdown would be significant, for our employees, our business, our customers, and the industry as we were an essential service, food provider and supplier to major domestic retailers. The key to protecting ACC and our employees was to ensure operational continuity. To do this, we needed to be in a position to rapidly track and trace a potentially infected employee, their movements, their associations, their locations and enact the necessary isolation requirements immediately.

Extensive effort and resources were implemented to enable accurate and real time data collection and recording for over 900 employees, which included a highly transient labour hire workforce. The detailed information was used to systematically and if required in an emergency, a robust track and trace model.

- Employee name
- Residential location / suburb
- Work location
- Roster
- Means of transport to work and carpooling
- Locker location
- Lunchroom seating
- Cohabiting staff/family groups for over 900 employees through the facility every day.

To ensure the viability and effectiveness of the extensive administration, data and information keeping being understood, ACC undertook 'what-if' scenarios. These were conducted as mock-emergency response to a hypothetical infection. Firstly, we staged a 24-hour exercise under the oversight of Respond Global. Then, to test system functionality, we invited Queensland Health to choose a worker at random, initiating a successful track-and-trace audit within 30 minutes. Track and trace audits continue to be conducted periodically to ensure the process is working as required. Audits continue to be completed around the 30-minute mark.

COVID Safe eLearning Videos

A key part of ACC's engagement with Respond Global, involved the development and production of a customised series of Covid Safe Videos, (eLearning modules). The videos were scripted and professionally filmed onsite at our Cannon Hill Processing facility. These videos were set up within Learning Management System and all staff were allocated the learning paths electronically. Staff were urged to complete them at the beginning of the workday, during lunch or after their shift. The modules were kept simple and short and also contained a transcript that could be downloaded and translated by individual staff. These were deployed electronically and included assessment questions to check and confirm understand of content.

The topics included:

You can view the eLearning modules below:

- Correct wearing of face mask
- Correct screening procedure front gate
- Safely using cross walks
- Safely using the laundry room
- Safely using the boot room
- Safely using the locker room
- Safely using the canteen
- Safely using washroom
- Safety in the boning room
- COVID-safe cleaning techniques for Cleaners
- PPE: Covid Balaclavas.

The pandemic necessitated rapid procurement of supplies. Up to 10,000 single-use surgical masks are needed in store every day, along with supplies of hand sanitiser for the 80 sanitisation stations installed around the production site, administration areas, feedlots, and properties. ACC's response to protecting our people and our operation in response to the pandemic and its threat, included rapid procurement of high-volume consumable supplies related to cleaning, sterilisation, face masks and sanitizer. These products were in high demand and we needed to ensure ongoing supply. We worked with experts from Respond Global and Queensland Health to develop create customised full-face balaclavas that have become our permanent PPE for all 900 production-floor staff.

Whilst wearing face masks presented some minor discomfort and inconvenience to majority of employees, for those in our front-line operational areas, there were some very real impracticalities faced. Considering these, the risk of supply worldwide for these items and the additional and ongoing cost as consumables, ACC engaged with Armour Safety in search of a comfortable, hygienic and launderable balaclava that would provide the required protection. Armour undertook analysis and research into the best products and the best materials to use and determined polyester and cotton together were ideal.

This lengthy process entailed several design iterations and incurred a major capital expenditure burden for the company. As we implemented more stringent requirements to protect staff, ACC sought to incorporate a type of filtration into the launderable balaclava. Armour developed a solution using 3 layers of fabric around the mouth and nose area. Now known as the "Covid balaclava", it can withstand between 10 and 20 launders before needing replacement and a harsh laundering process with industrial laundering and bleach to kill bacteria. These samples and were sent to Queensland Health to approve and Doctor Ian Norton approved it.

As outlined, ACC utilised multiple strategies were deployed at all levels of the hierarchy of control.

1. Firstly, ACC sought to eliminate risk by reducing unnecessary contact, attendance, and crossover. Strict protocols were implemented for screening (temperature and visitor/employee declarations).
2. Extensive changes to the design of work as the workforce was segregated, remote working implemented and additional office areas established.
3. Our work environment underwent twice daily cleans, including air conditioning sanitation and administration areas being disinfected nightly.
4. Administration lunchrooms were closed to minimise risk. Operational lunchrooms underwent significant redesign, with individual partitions and seating allocations
5. Covid19 Training – customised videos, deployed through learning management system for all employees relating to social distancing, hand washing, sanitising.
6. Manager and Supervisor training on COVID awareness and myth busters provided in conjunction with Respond Global.

7. ACC contracted supplier to develop reusable and launderable balaclavas as additional PPE, that were both safe and comfortable.
- The ACC response spanned the entire workforce – from the business founder to the operational and front line teams in our processing facility, feedlots, and properties. Our founder, Trevor Lee, made the initial contact with worldwide expert consultant, Dr Ian Norton of Respond Global and a member of Queensland Health’s Covid Advisory Panel and the company invested in the expertise.

3. How did you ensure your organisation was able to adapt during COVID-19?

How did you stay up-to-date?

- Constant monitoring of Qld Health COVID updates, immediate deployment of key messages and Qld Health directives to all impacted employees through our direct SMS service.
- Firsthand, expert advice provided by Dr Ian Norton and subscription to Respond Global’s “Covid -Ready” portal.
- Maintaining detailed and current employee information to enable track and trace and identify risk areas.
- We created a simple, single-page blueprint in conjunction with Respond Global and this document helped establish industry standard guidelines.

What sources of information have you used to inform COVID-19 risk management? Did you use any WHSQ COVID-19 guidance documents?

- There was no specialised information for the red meat processing industry existed and we were instrumental in helping the industry and Queensland Health officials develop guidelines and protocols. Response Protocol for a Confirmed Case of COVID-19 at a Red Meat Processing Establishment, Safe Food Production Queensland, September 2020 – and subsequent revisions.

What were some of the innovative solutions you used to remain productive, invigorate, reinvent, maintain and/or grow your business?

- Relying on the expert advice of Dr Norton and the team from Respond Global, we were able to remain responsive and adapt during the evolution of the pandemic by initiating a traffic light system to provide safety alerts and utilising companywide SMS communications to deploy messages and links to Qld Health directives.
- ACC implemented COVID eLearning program with a series of 13 short videos designed to provide Cannon Hill specific instruction and information on how to be COVID Safe in the workplace.
- Acknowledging that the additional PPE implemented in the full-face balaclavas meant it was more difficult to communicate non-verbally and even recognise work colleagues, leading to possible disassociation and mental wellbeing implications. In addition to our established employee assistance program, in conjunction with Workcover Queensland a series of mental wellbeing counselling sessions individuals and mental health awareness training for managers, supervisors and health & safety representatives.
- Endorsement of the company’s COVID-19 campaign carried through to senior management, who were tasked to attend fortnightly COVID-19 catchups, and beyond them to operational staff.
- ACC’s Work Health and Safety Manager worked alongside a dedicated WHSO officer re-assigned solely to the task of COVID- 19 control.
- At an operational level and where we recognised the greatest risk, employees were reassigned to perform roles as “COVID-19 Marshals”. The role of the marshals was to monitor and observe strict protocols in place.
- Strategic and operational announcements were regularly with the staff through toolbox talks and ad-hoc meetings as required across all levels of operations.

- COVID-19 preparedness became the foremost item in staff talk, televised to the Agri-staff as well as production team leaders and administration employees.
- Messaging was consistent and content was directed by Queensland Health recommendations. We used specialised messaging for our workforce by describing the preferred distance for social distancing as 'one-cow-length' apart. It was a concept universally understood by all staff: agricultural and processing.
- In order to limit air droplet spread, staff were advised to use sign language instead of shouting in noisy workspaces.
- As availability of the vaccine fluctuated, we had to introduce adaptability of messaging. There were regular information bulletins circulated as text messages via SMS and email, on posters and broadcast on all the lunchroom televisions.
- Recognising the multi-cultural workforce and its differing levels of engagement and literacy, a range of languages and graphics were used across a variety of platforms.

4. What have been the ongoing positive effects of the changes you've made as a result of COVID-19?

ACC recognised that COVID-19 and its potential mutations present an ongoing challenge and is using this experience to strengthen site biosecurity and ensure operational sustainability. We have confidence in our ability to maintain operational continuity in that we successfully avoided any forced shut-down due to COVID presence, in an essential service and industry, within an environment that was highly likely to spread infectious disease if presented.

Temperature scanning had not existed at the production plant pre-COVID-19. It will now be adopted as a fundamental firstline strategy in biosecurity. A by-product of this practice is increased personal connection and communication with staff arise from temperature check screening on entry resulting in higher level of engagement, trust, and disclosure.

ACC has established confidence within our customers both domestically and internationally in being able to maintain operations.

It has accelerated our use of digital technologies which is proving time and cost effective for a business with a wide geographical spread of operations.

We are proud of how the staff have grown to accept the new PPE. Potential clients – particularly export customers – see our staff securely clad and operating at the world's-best level of biosecurity. We are confident that this will help secure contracts for our Queensland business.

Established clients have expressed their gratitude for our increased focus on biosecurity that translated into business continuity. They continue to meet Australia's increased demand for red meat during the lock down.

The pandemic challenged our workforce and our operational standards and we have responded by lifting our levels of preparedness for this and any future bio-threats. COVID-19 has shown us the importance of interdependency, internationally, nationally, regionally and within our business.

The ongoing use of customised full-face launderable balaclavas that have become our permanent PPE for 900 front line production staff. ACC now uses colour schemes that are allocated to different departments for easy identification.

Additional concern around worker wellbeing has led to a commitment to ongoing mental health programs for workers on our remote and rural properties. That project is due to be rolled-out post-July 2021.

How did you monitor and evaluate your results?

To monitor and evaluate results, a staff member was commissioned to enter all track-and-trace data, including individual movement touchpoints. She also scribed for the mock emergencies and collated data for the overall project response project. This data was then collated for compliance and reporting. Specific data is still being compiled and analysed but early findings, eg the Q1 results (fig 4) were shared in the recent weekly televised 'muster'. Overall focus on employee health and well-being has seen an improvement in health and safety awareness and proactive approach across all sites. This has translated into fewer pro-active (preventative) and reactive (treatment) actions. Results from the most recent quarter reveal a welcome downward trend.

COVID-19 actions and responses continue to be first priority at our company-wide weekly 'Monday Muster' – a videoconference meeting session to all ACC sites, including agribusiness on feedlots and properties. The Group Manager - Work, Health and Safety group manager champions the campaign and now discusses all things operational with senior management and that information is then distributed by operational announcements across the group. ACC also reports regularly to relevant state and federal authorities.

Can your initiatives be applied to wider industry or other industries? If so, have they already been implemented by other businesses? (Contributes to the leadership category.)

ACC's initial engagement with world renowned experts, Respond Global has contributed significantly to the industry.

Respond Global continue to provide advice to various industry and government bodies. ACC's contribution to wider industry included ACC's Work Health and Safety Manager (at that time) formed one of five industry representatives in the SFPQ working group. Working in conjunction with Queensland Health and Safe Food Production Queensland (SFPQ) saw ACC help establish response protocols for the industry. Due to its proximity to Brisbane, ACC was commonly used as a reference for the protocols.

New balaclavas have been designed to restrict air droplet spray and we anticipate a lower incidence of respiratory ailments across the wider meat processing sector as a result. The balaclavas that we commissioned are now a new gold standard in PPE for the meat industry. See here: <https://armoursafety.com.au/armour-innovation-product-expertise-helps-covidresponse/>.

By examining business continuity risks, we identified particular cohorts who were among the first advised to work from home. This has established a new protocol that will be followed in the event of any other major infection challenges.

We are continuing to further decrease touchpoints and are consulting with two companies for permanent, hands-free, facial recognition temperature-scanning technology to integrate with the entry turnstile to prepare for any ongoing disease challenges.

What have been the positive effects on workers or other stakeholders? (e.g. improved safety culture, enhanced stakeholder relationships.)

We established a one-to-one greeter for production staff at the gatehouse. They are tasked with personally checking every staff member for general health as well as a personal greeting. This 'personal touch' will be continued. Another response that will be continued is the practice of seeking to answer workers' COVID-19 questions within their shift.