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DATE: November 13, 2020
SUBJECT: Guidance on Executive Order 176 (Social Distancing and Mass Gathering Policies)

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As you are likely aware, Governor Cooper released [Executive Order 176](#) this week. This latest EO rolled back the limits for "mass gatherings," reducing them from 25 to 10 people inside. Outside gatherings were not affected and remain limited to 50 people. Also, rules governing youth livestock shows have not changed.

The exception from [EO 169](#) (page 3 and page 15 Sec 3.8) and Phase 3 that allows larger groups is still in effect, and we have received guidance from the university on how it can be used – meetings within Extension county centers or similar meeting rooms do NOT qualify for this exception. A few counties may have access to conference facilities (identified as conference centers under the fire code). However, in order to meet in those facilities and go beyond 10 people, masks must be worn at all times regardless of physical distancing; a minimum distance of 6 feet between participants is required; and no group gatherings are allowed (e.g. social hour, breaks, etc.).

In addition, individual counties vary greatly in how "open" they are to the public. Even though state guidelines might allow it, individual counties may or may not be open to holding any in-person meetings, regardless of group size.

The current EO restrictions are in effect until December 4, 2020, at 5 p.m. At that time, they could be continued or they could become more restrictive. Based on the Governor's commentary this week, I (me personally) expect that these rules may not become less restrictive until after the holidays.

Please consider that it is going to be hard to plan and execute in-person meetings and activities for a while. At this point, there is no way to predict what the allowed meeting numbers might look like in January or February. Let's all remember that we have a job to do. Our customers – including the agricultural community, youth and many members of the public – continue to need the unbiased, research-based information that we provide.

I also want to remind everyone that our specialists and others who may be asked to present at meetings are free to decide whether or not to participate in-person or to deliver information virtually. Content delivery is the key, not the channel through which the content is delivered. During this time, when the state's rural areas are also experiencing high levels of COVID-19, it is important that we protect our specialists, agents and staff, as well as our youth and adult clientele. We ask everyone to extend an extra measure of grace and understanding when planning meetings and other activities.

For now, all in-person off-campus meetings must be cleared with County Extension Directors, and any meetings in conference facilities that go beyond the 10-person inside limit must be approved by the District Extension Director.

Thank you for everything you are doing to help the people of North Carolina and beyond, please be safe.
RichB

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