



## Face masks are in short supply. A U.S. export ban would make things worse

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April 13, 2020

When something's in short supply, a natural instinct is to keep as much of it as possible within your nation's borders.

That's what President Donald Trump and the Federal Emergency Management Agency are trying to do with an order restricting exports of face masks and surgical gloves. If they enforce the order too strictly, however, they risk making the shortage worse.

Last year, the United States exported about \$1 billion of this personal protective equipment, according to an analysis by **Chad Bown** of the Peterson Institute for International Economics. It imported \$6 billion of the same products.

Not only do we import finished products in large quantities, we also import parts and materials needed to make the medical gear. The pulp that U.S. manufacturers use to make filters for their masks, for instance, comes from Canada.

“We source so many protective products from so many countries that this policy makes no sense whatsoever,” Bown told me.

If we start seizing outbound masks at the border, other countries are likely to retaliate. According to the website **Global Trade Alert**, 54 other countries have already placed restrictions on exports of medical equipment this year. Instead of joining this protectionist parade, the U.S. should be a leader in calling for global cooperation.

The economic folly — and likely humanitarian cost — of an export ban became apparent on April 3, when Trump said the government **would prevent 3M** from sending N95 respirator masks to Canada and Latin America.

According to Ontario Prime Minister Doug Ford, U.S. officials actually **blocked a shipment** of 3 million 3M masks, leaving supplies dangerously short in his province.

**3M objected**, saying it was a critical supplier both north and south of the border. The company noted that it also makes masks in China, which had just granted permission to ship 10 million N95 respirators to the U.S.

Restricting trade in these life-saving products, 3M said, could leave the U.S. with fewer face masks, not more. That, the company added, would be “the opposite of what we and the administration, on behalf of the American people, both seek.”

The Trump administration relented, **agreeing last week** to let 3M continue supplying its foreign customers. 3M pledged to import 166.5 million respirators from China in the next three months, which should demonstrate the benefits of unfettered trade in these products.

The FEMA order, meanwhile, remains in place.

Simon Lester, a trade policy expert at the Cato Institute, hopes FEMA will use the order merely to track where supplies are going, not to halt shipments. The order is written in a way that it can be applied flexibly, he said.

“I think it's misguided if the concern is we want to make sure we have enough,” Lester added. “All governments need to do what they can to ramp up production, and then work together to make sure equipment goes where it's needed.”

Still, it's concerning that Peter Navarro, the architect of Trump's trade policy, has been put in charge of beefing up the medical-equipment supply chain. Two years ago, when Trump imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum imports, **Navarro predicted** that other countries wouldn't respond in kind. Nearly every trading partner quickly retaliated with tariffs of its own.

With lives on the line both in America and abroad, the world can't afford another miscalculation of that sort.