

Tuesday, May 26, 2020

Food & Water Action Analysis of USDA Meat Processing Policy During COVID-19 Pandemic

By Tony Corbo, Sr. Government Affairs Representative for Food & Water Action

After pushback on meat processing deregulation citing worker and food safety especially in relation to the prevention of the coronavirus, two more meat processing facilities that the USDA allowed to deregulate became major hot spots for COVID-19 cases this weekend.

In Guymon, Oklahoma the Seaboard hog slaughter and processing facility [reported](#) 440 employees tested positive for COVID-19, making up the most cases in the entire state of Oklahoma. The Seaboard plant was given permission from the USDA in early March to convert to the New Swine Inspection System which allows companies to reduce the number of government food safety inspectors present and increase slaughter lines. The Seaboard plant now has fewer USDA inspectors stationed on the slaughter line and no line speed cap.

In Vernon, California, the Farmer John meat processing plant owned by Smithfield [reported](#) over 100 workers tested positive for COVID-19 over the weekend. This plant was part of the original pilot program run by the USDA for deregulated inspection and increased line speeds in hog slaughter.

Meat companies have been pushing to keep these dangerous meat plants open despite fears of coronavirus by citing impending meat shortages due to disruptions. However, on May 21, USDA [issued a report](#) indicating that the amount of meat in cold storage has actually increased from levels reported a year ago. Similarly, on May 22, USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service issued its weekly report on meat exports which noted that exports of pork were "up noticeably from the previous week and up 36 percent from the prior 4-week average." In fact, [over the week ending May 14](#), the U.S. exported 109,588,500 pounds of pork, with 40% of it going to the People's Republic of China.

There were 2.455 billion pounds of beef, pork, chicken, and turkey in [cold storage in April 2020](#), up 2.1% over April 2019 levels. Meanwhile, meat prices have been skyrocketing at retail while farmers are being paid lower prices for the animals they are raising for the meatpackers, prompting members of Congress to call for investigations.

At the same time, USDA is sending massive bailouts to meatpacking companies. On May 19, USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service announced that Pilgrim's Pride, a subsidiary of Brazilian meatpacker JBS, [received a contract award](#) of \$257,369.54 to purchase 360,000 pounds of poultry products under USDA's Trade Mitigation Program. That purchase came on the heels of a purchase of 4,840,960 pounds of pork products totaling \$7,842,355.20 on March 6. And, just today, USDA announced that it had awarded JBS another contract totaling \$10,787,280.16 for the purchase of nearly 4.4 million pounds of pork products. Most of that meat came from plants that have registered high numbers of COVID-19 cases among plant workers.

Finally, after months of pleading with their bosses, inspectors for USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) [were told](#) on May 22 that the agency had enough proper face masks and face shields in stock to distribute. On the FSIS [website](#), it states that the agency had a plan to deal with emergency response, such as human pandemic. The below actions belie that claim.

The agency changed its policy [multiple times](#) over the past two months on the use of facial protection; it first took the position that no inspector could wear face masks; then agency officials said that the inspectors furnish their own face masks provided that the plant officials approved; then they told inspectors that they could procure their own face masks and would be reimbursed up to \$50; on May 22, the agency announced that it procured an adequate supply of face masks to provide inspectors. Some of the face shields that the agency distributed in April did not fit on the helmets inspectors are required to wear and the face shields fogged over making it impossible for proper meat inspection. The May 22 announcement allegedly corrects those issues. This agency has reported that four of its inspectors have died from COVID-19 and another 200 have tested positive for the virus.