dgLivestockSituation

Livestock farmers face ‘difficult decisions’ as plant closures persist

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Bottlenecks in the meat processing chain caused by temporary packing plant closures continue to reduce options for livestock farmers and consumers at grocery stores.

And the situation, caused by the coronavirus pandemic, could get worse.

The clock ticks on farms where herds and flocks continue to grow in a biological system that relies on moving animals to market in a timely manner. A disruption of the chain quickly backed up animals on farms.

About 22 pork packing plants, representing more than a quarter of capacity, temporarily closed as of April 28, including the Smithfield Food facility in Monmouth. That plant reopened May 4, with its approximate 1,700 employees representing about 3% of pork processing capacity in the U.S.

“Things have turned pretty dire for the pork industry,” Jennifer Tirey, executive director of the Illinois Pork Producers Association, told the RFD Radio Network. “With packing plants down, it continues to cause bottlenecks. We can’t get our hogs to market.”

Gordon Spronk of Pipestone Veterinary Services estimates U.S. hog harvest capacity at about 504,470 head per day. But 50,000 up to 250,000 market-ready hogs remain unharvested daily due to the plant closures.

“We’re not harvesting to capacity,” said Spronk, who recommends farmers each form their own crisis management team. “As we all know, this changes by the hour.”

Tasha Bunting, Illinois Farm Bureau associate director of commodities and livestock programs, said the combination of plant closures and lost restaurant and food service markets due to shelter-in-place orders are also behind shortages at some meat counters in grocery stores. It’s difficult for the industry to repurpose bulk products destined for food service to individual sale.

“We are not facing a (food) shortage right now; it’s just a distribution disruption,” Bunting said. “We’re facing bottlenecks in various parts of the chain.

“It’s still pretty early to anticipate what will happen,” she noted. “I think a lot depends on how many (packing plants) go offline and how many barns we might have to depopulate.”

President Donald Trump signed an executive order last week that declared packing plants critical infrastructure that must remain open to help alleviate the situation. But it was not an immediate fix.

“If we can’t get our products shipped to market, then our farmers will have to make some really tough decisions,” said Tirey, who noted the pork industry in Illinois was about 10 to 14 days away from starting to depopulate herds as of last week.

Dave Pyburn, chief veterinarian for the National Pork Board (NPB), urges hog farmers to consider implementing methods to slow pig growth first before resorting to euthanization.

Methods to slow pig growth include transitioning the animals to a low-energy/high-fiber diet, remove all sources of added fat from rations, adjust the lysine-to-calorie ratio, remove any growth promoting technology and limit feed intake by adjusting feeder gate openings.

But once those options are exhausted, depopulation could ramp up as more animals back up on farms. Bill Even, NPB CEO, noted hog slaughter decreased 32% last week.

“No matter where you’re at in that decision, the first thing you need to do is contact your head veterinarian and go over a depopulation checklist and develop a best plan for your farm,” Pyburn said.

The second step farmers should take if they’re considering depopulation of a herd is contact a state animal health official to get help with state specific issues and laws, and see if each farmer qualifies for possible indemnity funds for market losses or disposal costs.

“We need to make the decision under We Care principles (established by the pork industry),” Spronk said. “We need to do the right thing.”

Hog farmers can find resources offering guidance through the COVID-19 ordeal, including possible herd depopulation, online at {pork.org/covid19} or by calling 800-456-7675.

A plant set to reopen in Minnesota won’t be initially processing the hogs for meat, though. The JBS plant in Worthington instead planned to euthanize up to 13,000 pigs per day, which would require just 10 to 20 employees from its workforce of about 2,000.

The situation looks to be the highest loss of U.S. hog herd numbers since the outbreak of porcine epidemic diarrhea virus that resulted in about an 8% reduction in the total U.S. pig crop in 2013-14.