dg-Meatsupply

Farm groups, USDA plan to maintain meat supply, animal movements

BY DANIEL GRANT

FarmWeek

A spree of meat sales since the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic March 11 put a dent in local supplies and boosted prices of boxed products.

Farm groups and USDA in response continue to work together on measures to assure a steady supply of meat and movements of farm animals throughout the ongoing ordeal.

“Our main concern is a supply chain disruption,” said Brian Duncan, Illinois Farm Bureau vice president and hog farmer from Polo (Ogle County).

“As we look at it from the processing side, we need to make sure packing plants stay open and the transportation system remains in place,” he noted. “From the farm side, we have to make sure suppliers stay open to provide items such as feed and vaccines. It’s a biological system, we’ve got to keep it moving.”

It’s believed coronavirus originated in bats and was linked to wholesale live animal and seafood markets in Wuhan, China, where the first human case was identified Dec. 17. But it’s not a foodborne issue, and there’s no evidence the virus can be spread via food or packaging, according to the Pork Checkoff.

There’s also no evidence domesticated animals play a role in the spread of coronavirus, which gets transmitted from person to person.

Consumers responded with widespread purchases of packaged meat in recent weeks.

“The empty shelves on grocery stores is problematic,” Duncan said. “People need to eat. We need to keep the food supply moving.”

USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and Agricultural Marketing Service, issued a joint statement last week assuring farmers and consumers the agencies remain committed to ensure safety of employees while still providing timely delivery of services to maintain the movement of America’s food supply from farm to fork.

“That (a potential supply disruption) is a big concern,” Buzz Iliff, Illinois Beef Association president, told the RFD Radio Network. “That would be devastating to the chain. We need to keep animals moving through the system so we don’t get a big backlog and really drop the price even more.”

While the retail price of meat climbed in recent weeks, hog and cattle prices plummeted prior to a slight recovery early last week.

Since mid-January, the April fed cattle contract declined 22%, the April feeder cattle contract slipped 19% and the April lean hog contract fell 18%, according to CME Group’s Daily Livestock Report.

“Psychologically, it’s pretty tough to take when you see the futures market limit down,” Duncan said. “It’s frustrating when higher meat prices don’t make their way to the farm gate.”

The National Pork Producers Council requested an additional $300 million from the federal government for the pork industry to help with any potential bottlenecks at packing plants.

If a worker or workers in a processing plant test positive for coronavirus, those workers would be quarantined and the plant would be sanitized so it could be reopened, rather than closed, according to the Pork Checkoff.

Hog farmers in Illinois who have issues with labor or securing veterinary care should contact the Illinois Pork Producers Association at 217-529-3100. END