US Pork Industry COVID-19 and lessons learned

Liz Wagstrom
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March 10 release

“The specter of market-ready hogs with nowhere to go is a nightmare for every pork producer in the country”

Worst case scenario happens
COVID-19 Meatpacking Plants

- Human infections caused closures and slowdowns
  - Illness and fear drove absenteeism
- Increased safety protocols lead to reduced work flow
  - Social distancing, barriers, health screens, etc.
Backups of pigs

- Slow down and closures of plants caused pigs to have no place to be marketed
- There were many days over 100,000 pigs capacity declines
  - Latest Hogs and Pigs report indicated around 2 million animals have “disappeared”
- Because of pig flow through our barns solutions were difficult
  - Double stocking younger pigs
  - Altering diets of heavier pigs
  - Not breeding or terminating pregnancies in sows
  - Alternate markets
- Still have concerns with excess animals in the fall
Direct from farm sales of live animals

Processing on the farms

Alternate markets: smaller processors, non-pork states, wild game processors

Potential food safety and/or animal welfare considerations
Animal Depopulations

- To preserve animal welfare some animals were depopulated
  - Worked to provide methods that were humane and approved by the American Veterinary Medical Association

- Environmentally responsible disposal of animal carcasses
  - Some states did grind/compost, other projects on shallow burial, also rendering
Advocacy Group Challenges

Press Release

Emergency Legal Petition Filed with USDA to End Cruel Farm ‘Depopulation’ Methods

Ventilation shutdown and water-based foam methods used to kill animal populations during the pandemic are among the cruelest ways to kill farmed animals.

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U.S. Department of Agriculture Petitioned to Ban Mass Burial, On-Site Incineration of Factory-Farmed Animals During Pandemic

Legal Action Calls for Creation of Public, Online Database to Track Mass Killing, Disposal Locations

WASHINGTON—Conservation, environmental-justice and public-health groups filed a legal petition today calling for the U.S. Department of Agriculture to ban dangerous on-site incineration and unlined burial of millions of industrially raised farm animals killed during the COVID-19 emergency.

The legal action seeks to compel the USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service to protect communities and the environment from dangerous pollution resulting from under-regulated and poorly monitored animal disposal during the pandemic. The petition was prompted by the meat industry’s rush to kill millions of animals that cannot be processed into food following slaughterhouse closures and slowdowns due to the spread of coronavirus.

The petition was filed by Earthjustice, NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council) and the Center for Biological Diversity on behalf of 14 organizations. Petitioners also urge the USDA to create a publicly accessible, online database that tracks federal assistance for mass carcass disposal and provides people living near carcass-disposal locations with the information they need to protect themselves from pollution.
Opportunities and Successes

- Daily State and Federal Animal Health official calls
  - Identification of agencies that could provide resources
  - Purchases of additional depopulation equipment
  - Public/Private partnerships and initiatives

- Industry Incident Management Team
  - Public health, animal welfare, depopulation, disposal, production
Lessons Learned

- Emotions run high during a crisis!
- Communication – sometimes blunt – helped tremendously
- Industry helping itself – in addition to asking for help from state and federal government – helped make progress
Lessons Learned

▪ This was better than any full functional exercise or drill
▪ Lessons learned from COVID need to be applied to FAD planning
  – Depopulation methods
  – Disposal methods
  – Diagnostic test development and deployment
  – Data management