

# Meatpacking and Covid-19

As we move into the late fall, the number of US residents newly infected with COVID-19 is declining as are the number of deaths. School has resumed for most students. The cautious among us are still wearing our masks as we wait to see whether or not we will face another surge in infections and deaths as winter weather—the traditional flu season—sets in.

Some have suggested that we may never completely vanquish the disease and it will reappear each fall and subside with warmer spring weather. At this point in time, we still hold out hope that with good treatment and a worldwide campaign we will be able to eradicate the disease. In a period with far fewer preventative tools, the virus that caused the 1918 Pandemic, eventually ran out of victims.

While our training allows us to identify the general epidemiological issues surrounding the current pandemic, we lack the tools to venture a guess as to what will happen next. What we are trained to do is identify and analyze the economic and agricultural issues that have arisen as the result of the disease.

On October 27, 2021, the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis (Subcommittee) held a hearing on “The Impact of the Coronavirus on Meatpacking Workers Nationwide.” Using documents from JBS USA Food Company, Tyson Foods, Smithfield Foods, Cargill Meat Solutions, and National Beef Packing, the Subcommittee found that “over 59,000 meatpacking workers employed by these 5 companies alone contracted the coronavirus, and at least 269 died” during the 11 months between March 1, 2020 and February 2, 2021 (<https://tinyurl.com/jxw3adxn>). Together these 5 companies account for 80 percent of beef processing and 60 percent of pork processing in the US.

What is concerning from a policy perspective is “even when infections hit their worst levels—sickening workers to the point of impacting facility operations—companies continued to espouse a work-at-all-costs attitude and almost uniformly resisted adopting the kinds of measures that would keep their employees safe.”

To say that this did not have to happen may seem like second-guessing the leadership of the five companies who were confronting an unanticipated event.

But, the Subcommittee reported “As early as 2006, the federal government was acutely aware of the need for industries involving essential workers to prepare for a viral respiratory pandemic. In January 2007, the President’s National Infrastructure Advisory Council warned that it ‘is not a matter of if, but rather a matter of when’ a contagious respiratory illness pandemic would occur. Then-President Bush’s Homeland Security Council recommended that companies—including meatpacking companies—engage in ‘effective continuity planning including protection of personnel during an influenza pandemic’ as a “‘good business practice’ that must become part of the fundamental mission of all...private sector businesses.”

In his opening remarks at this year’s October 27<sup>th</sup> hearing, Subcommittee Chairman James E. Clyburn said, “When the pandemic began, meatpacking companies were too slow to respond to worker demands for safer conditions. While workers fought for greater protections, the large meatpacking conglomerates focused on protecting their profits. The National Economic Council recently found that meat processors have generated record profits during the pandemic, at the expense of consumers, farmers, and ranchers” (<https://tinyurl.com/v2a3pwft>).

The slow response of the leadership of the meatpacking companies stands in contrast to Harwood’s experience working for a major grocery retailer. As it became apparent that the coronavirus infections were moving beyond the initial outbreak that was concentrated in nursing

homes, the local store management where he works began to initiate actions designed to protect both frontline workers and consumers. Door handles and other contact surfaces were regularly sanitized. Workers were required to wear facemasks and customers were encouraged to do the same. In contrast with the meatpacking industry, similar actions were seen across the retail grocery sector.

As we move beyond the crisis phase of this pandemic, we need to remember that this is not the last time we will be faced with a respiratory virus that has the potential to become a pandemic. Between now and then, the agricultural and food sector in cooperation with public health agencies needs to develop contingency plans to protect the food supply and the people involved in each stage of the food system from farmers to consumers.

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