

The H1N1 Virus and the Virginia and U.S. Pork Industries

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As of this writing (May 14, 2009), the U.S. Center for Disease Control has confirmed 3352 cases and three deaths due to the H1N1 virus in a total of 44 states and Washington D.C. World-wide, there have been over 6497 cases in 33 countries. By the time you read this update article, I am sure these numbers will have soared

Novel influenza A (H1N1) is a new flu virus of swine origin that was first detected in April of this year and is now spreading from person-to-person. Although originally called “swine flu”, Dr. Robert Webster, a virologist at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee and a preeminent expert on influenza recently stated, "This is a human virus." Fortunately, to this point the vast majority of inflicted persons have experienced relatively mild flu-like symptoms and recovered quickly. Unfortunately for swine producers, however, the hysteria associated with the current pandemic and the stigma attached with “swine flu” has consumers scared to eat pork. **There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that H1N1 can be transmitted by eating pork.**

What effect has the pandemic had on the economics of swine operations? The National Pork Board, using data compiled by Paragon Economics, summarized the impact on the industry and I have listed a few of the findings below:

1. Spot hog prices, in other words, those prices negotiated each day, fell by \$6.74/cwt carcass from Friday, April 24 through Friday, May 2. That translates to a per-head value loss of \$13.64 for the animals whose price is negotiated each day. The effect on contract hogs has been less severe but still significant. The average price for all purchases declined by \$3.40/cwt carcass from April 24 through May 1, meaning the average value of all hogs purchased during that time period fell by \$6.78 per head.
2. Multiplying each day's per-head value decline for all purchases by each day's slaughter reveals that producers saw a reduced sales value of approximately \$6.9 million dollars relative to the animals' value on April 24 during the week that ended May 2.
3. The average cost of production at present is estimated to be \$139.45 per head. At the average price and revenue of \$121.76 on Friday, May 2, this results in a loss of \$17.69 per head. With a daily harvest averaging 410,000 head, producers are losing approximately \$7.2 million per day at the price levels of Friday, May 1.

Industry representatives are making efforts to reassure consumers that pork continues to be safe to eat, and to work with U.S. officials to re-establish trade markets that were closed shortly after the onset of the outbreak. For example, Ecuador, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, the Philippines, Ukraine and the United Arab Emirates banned all pork from the U.S. China prohibited pork imports from the states of Texas, New York, California, Ohio and Kansas. Russia will not allow imports of pork from California, Kansas, New York, Ohio, and Texas. The National Pork Producers Council (NPPC) has urged USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack to implement a USDA

purchase program for \$50 million of pork products to help boost cash hog prices. These products could be put into federal emergency food programs, food pantries, senior/elderly feeding programs, hunger programs and other non-commercial food channels. NPPC also requested that President Obama work with U.S. trading partners to remove all restrictions on exports of U.S. pork and pork products and to maintain U.S. pork export markets around the world.

Adding to this already depressing situation, Canadian officials recently confirmed the first case of H1N1 on a swine herd in Alberta. This resulted from exposure to a worker returning from Mexico who was exhibiting flu-like symptoms. The virus caused mild illness and the pigs are recovering. So, there is now evidence that the virus can be transmitted from not only people to people, but people to pigs as well. **It is imperative then that hog farmers quickly evaluate and step up their bio-security procedures.**

The National Pork Board has developed a list of recommendations, a few of the most urgent of which, I think are listed below. I encourage you to visit the National Pork Board's website where the complete summary can be found at this link:

<http://www.pork.org/Documents/Biosecurity%20recommendations%20for%20producers.pdf>

- Limit the entry of people into your facility to workers and essential service personnel.
- Prevent international visitors and people who have traveled to or from regions or countries where the virus has been reported from entering your facilities.
- Do not allow people exhibiting flu-like symptoms to enter your facility and ask all people to report recent international travel or report contact with others who have developed signs of illness. If people who have developed illness, report international travel or report contact with others who have developed illness are essential to the operation and must enter the facilities, enforce their use of properly fitted, valve-less N95 respirators, gloves and other personal protective equipment while on the farm and limit, as much as possible, their contact with the animals.
- Encourage all people to wash their hands and arms frequently while on-farm, including before and after handling pigs, before eating, smoking or touching their faces, mouths, eyes or noses.
- Encourage all people to use hand sanitizer following hand-washing.
- Prevent workers exhibiting these symptoms from entering swine facilities for at least seven days after displaying signs of respiratory illness, even mild ones. Recommend that workers with these symptoms be seen immediately by a medical provider.
- Encourage workers to report if members of their household develop influenza-like symptoms or have been diagnosed with influenza. Consider restricting the contact that these workers have with the animals.

Above all, remain vigilant of the health of the animals in your care. The routine practice of daily observation will allow producers and their employees to assess the health of the animals on the farm and all of the animals transported to other sites or the market. If you observe or employees report respiratory illness in pigs, pigs going off-feed or pigs developing a fever, contact a swine

veterinarian immediately. Rapid detection of the illness may help reduce the spread of the virus to other herds. Prompt confirmation of an H1N1 flu virus diagnosis on a farm will likely require that specimens or tissue samples be sent to a veterinary diagnostic laboratory. This must be done by a veterinarian or under direction of a veterinarian.