

## H1N1 OUTBREAK

For several months, U.S. pork producers have been feeling the pressure of rising feed costs. Their most recent dilemma, however, comes from lagging export demand and reduced domestic sales related to the H1N1 outbreak.

Toward the end of April, we all began to hear of an unusual strain of flu virus. People in California, Texas, and Mexico started becoming ill with this strange new virus that no one knew much about. Almost immediately the media began referring to the illness as “swine flu”. The resulting confusion quickly undermined consumer confidence in pork products and depressed markets for pork producers. Within days, the price of pork dropped \$10.41 per/cwt on pork carcasses.

Using daily price, carcass weights and market numbers, Dr. Steve Meyer, President of Paragon Economics, estimated that producer revenues dropped \$39.2 million from April 24 to May 12. Domestic pork sales plummeted because U.S. consumers’ pork purchases slowed. Several countries ceased importing U. S. pork products, most notably Russia and China. Perhaps the most important factor was the decrease in pork demand from Mexico. Mexico never closed its borders to U.S. pork, but pork purchases have fallen to a reported 80 percent as compared to early April. Mexico accounted for approximately 4 percent of U.S. pork production in January and February.

It was recognized early on that the news media had mistakenly linked pigs with the outbreak. Repeated reference to “swine flu”, though incorrect, led consumers here and in other countries to question the safety of pork products. It is tragic that the H1N1 outbreak has affected people’s lives through illness, discomfort, and even death, but unfortunately swine producers have experienced painful financial distress because of the erroneous connection. The crisis is not completely over, but the impacts to the swine industry could have been much greater without coordinated action from those who represent the pig business.

The National Pork Board, National Pork Producers Council, American Association of Swine Veterinarians, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Meat Export Federation, State Pork Associations, and numerous individuals have all been engaged in mitigating H1N1’s impact on the pork industry. This crisis management team sprung into action almost immediately after public health officials identified the problem. No stone was left unturned as efforts were made to counter the media confusion and to rebuild pork markets.

All industry resources became focused on the message that pork is safe, that this virus was not in our pigs and that calling it “swine flu” was confusing people and leading them away from the real ways they could protect themselves from the virus. On the first day that the virus made national news, there were 49 interviews done with national media by Pork Checkoff staff alone. Those interviews included everything from CNN, CBS News, Fox News, the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and others. Additionally, Pork Checkoff dollars were used to buy full page ads in The Wall Street Journal, USA Today and other daily newspapers. Press releases and a variety of Internet-based media were also used. FactsAboutPork.com has proven to be another valuable tool in providing key messages in both English and Spanish.

Experts from the Center for Disease Control teach that Influenza H1N1 “is not transmitted by food. You cannot get this flu from eating pork products”. Dr. William Schaffner, a flu expert at Vanderbilt University said, “There’s no evidence that any influenza virus, and in particular this one, has ever been transmitted by the food-borne route or by handling food products.” U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano, also said; “Pork and pork products are safe and there is no basis for restricting imports. You should also know that you cannot get H1N1 flu from eating pork. Pork products are perfectly safe”.

While the flu outbreak has faded somewhat from the national news, the work of the Pork Checkoff and the pork industry team has softened the blow that could have financially destroyed swine farmers. Unfortunately, we can never fully repair the damage that came from this pandemic that turned the pork industry upside down.

Happily, it appears consumer confidence is rebounding and pork sales may be on their way to potential profitability. The purpose of this column is not to minimize the seriousness of H1N1. It is merely to echo a request from those in the pork business that everyone properly refers to this influenza strain as H1N1.