

# Myth Buster Box

## An Ongoing Series on Ag Myths & Ways of Deflating Them

### → Myth: Abusive Work Conditions are ‘Essential’ to Heading off a Meat Famine

#### → Fact:

On April 27, meat giant Tyson Foods took out a full-page advertisement in major newspapers that carried an alarming message. “The food supply is breaking,” it said. The ad went on: “We have a responsibility to feed our country...Our plants must remain operational so that we can supply food to our families in America.”

Tyson was arguing that packing plants were “essential” and had to remain open during the COVID-19 pandemic. Infections have run rampant through packing facilities, including several owned by Tyson. In early spring, panic buying by grocery store customers had caused meat cases to look sparse, with some retailers even limiting purchases.

Tyson’s letter was effective. Two days after it ran, President Donald Trump signed an executive order declaring meatpacking plants as “essential infrastructure” and requiring them to remain open. Worker safety experts said the order would prevent local health officials from closing plants they determined were pandemic vectors and could also undermine efforts to, for example, put more distance between workers on the production line — something meat companies have long resisted.

Throughout the pandemic, Tyson, along with fellow meat giants like Smithfield and JBS, have argued that instituting certain safety measures in their facilities would threaten to starve Americans of protein.

#### Plenty of Meat...for Export

But we were never in danger of running out of meat. It turns out that when that newspaper ad was published, there was plenty of meat in cold storage. An even bigger indicator that Tyson’s Chicken Little proclamation was baseless is that a lot of meat was going overseas earlier this year. In fact, data compiled by the food chain analyst Panjiva and the USDA shows that in April, Tyson and Smithfield exported 1,289 tons and 9,170 tons of pork, respectively, to China. The USDA reported that overall U.S. pork exports to mainland China in April reached the highest monthly total since the agency began tracking this information two decades ago.

The *New York Times* reported that about 40% of the April pork exports were whole carcasses; whole carcasses are more profit-

able to ship. The poultry giant Mountaire grew its chicken exports to China and Hong Kong by 23% and 14%, in April and May, respectively, according to Panjiva.

So much for supplying “food to our families in America.” Another popular myth being circulated by Big Meat is that worker safety is its top priority. According to an ongoing tally that the *Food and Environmental Reporting Network* is keeping, as of late August over 490 meatpacking plants had confirmed cases of COVID-19 — 41,167 meat workers had tested positive, with 193 dying from the virus.

In July, a coalition of organizations filed a civil rights complaint with the USDA alleging Tyson and JBS have engaged in racial discrimination in the way they have handled COVID-19 at their packing plants. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recently reported that nearly 90% of infected meatpacking workers are people of color.

One of the groups filing the complaint is the HEAL Food Alliance; the Land Stewardship Project is a member-organization of the Alliance. According to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, corporations that receive federal assistance are required to comply with civil rights laws. The USDA awarded Tyson \$275 million from 2019 to 2020 and JBS USA and its subsidiary Pilgrim’s Pride \$193 million during the same period. But when JBS and Tyson packing plants became hotspots for COVID-19, company officials declined to adopt CDC recommendations for keeping workers at least six-feet-apart, charges the complaint.

It’s become clearer than ever that enforcement of safety procedures in packing plants are needed, as well as reforms such as the slowing down of line speeds. In April, the USDA granted waivers to 15 poultry plants, allowing them to increase line speeds from 140 birds per minute to 175. Faster line speeds cause increased injuries and require workers to stand closer together — a recipe for disaster in the age of COVID-19.

What is also needed is public investment in a different model of meat processing. As mega-packing operations have taken over, local “locker” plants have diminished. These are the small-town, independent plants that serve farmers who are direct-marketing to consumers, retailers, restaurants, and co-ops. Many smaller plants can’t afford to upgrade in order to meet qualifications for marketing

meat as packaged, separate cuts, something an increasing number of customers are demanding.

For the small locker plants that remain, farmers are reporting waiting times to get their animals processed stretching to a year or more. A recent survey of meat-producing farmers conducted by a team representing the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and numerous Minnesota groups, including LSP, found lack of small-scale processing capacity is hamstringing the local food movement. This is especially frustrating considering that almost 65% of the 111 farmers responding to the survey said demand for their product had gone up since the pandemic hit. As one farmer put it: “We have beef, we have customers, we need more local processing.” Over half of the respondents said they would raise more livestock if more processing was available. More animals integrated into cropping operations across the Midwest is key to creating a widespread sustainable farming system.

During the past legislative session, LSP helped secure \$100,000 in grant money for smaller Minnesota meat and poultry processors to expand their capacity. That’s a start, but more is needed, including state and federal regulation reform that makes it easier for small meat processors to upgrade and ship across state lines. Other creative ideas are also being discussed, such as making meat processors community-owned resources — LSP farmer-members LeeAnn and Jim VanDerPol propose such an idea on page 12.

Tyson and its Big Meat colleagues are right — the food supply is broken. What they won’t admit is that fixing it requires departing from a system based on putting employees, local farmers, communities, and other “essentials” at risk simply to plump up corporate profits.

#### More Information

- A *New York Times* article on the Panjiva analysis of meat exports is at <https://nyti.ms/2OFF5Ce>.

- The Minnesota Department of Agriculture has numerous resources for farmers who are interested in connecting with a meat processing plant. See [www.mda.state.mn.us/food-feed/meat-poultry-egg-inspection](http://www.mda.state.mn.us/food-feed/meat-poultry-egg-inspection), or call Jim Ostlie at 320-842-6910 or Courtney VanDerMey at 651-201-6135.