

Over the past 8 months, the world has endured a troubling pandemic due to the rapid outbreak of COVID-19. Across the world people have had to become accustomed to a new type of living: “Socially Distanced”. Although some industries are capable of moving their offices into their living rooms and continue a productive work cycle, there are some industries that are not capable of doing so, one being the swine industry. One thing that is for certain regardless of a global pandemic, people need food to survive on a daily basis. As we have seen over the past 6 – 8 months, packing plants can be forced to shut their doors due to a pandemic, and that leaves swine producers in a predicament on what to do with their pigs. The shutting down of packing plants not only puts a hold on finishing pig space, but it can cause catastrophic effects on all of your flows of pigs going all the way back to the sow farm if there is no space for wean pigs to be transported to. So, the big question is after the pandemic settles down: what does this do for producers and consumers over the next few years?

When packing plants were forced to close down, this put a shortage on fresh meat supplies available for the consumers to buy. When this happens, the packing plants are forced to buy live animals for cheaper than their value, causing the supply of the products to decrease. When supplies decrease, to make money the packers have to increase price above the market value, which results in a decrease in demand for the product. Consumers are put in situations in which they have to look for other ways to gain protein sources. One area that grew tremendously over the summer and looks to be impacted over the next year is raising your own animals and taking to a local meat locker for processing. To some families, this is nothing out of the ordinary raising a few pigs and cows to fill your freezer for the year, but as meat protein prices continued

to increase at the stores, people decided to buy their own animals and raise them. This caused a lot of small meat lockers across the Midwest to be booked up through the next year with appointments. Another area that I believe will gain attraction due to supply chain issues in the animal food industry is alternative meat protein. This can consist of plant-based and cell-cultured meat. Over the past year, alternative protein sources have gained attraction throughout the U.S. and advancements in the manufacturing process has allowed these products to become more economical for consumers. As we have seen, there is potential for fresh meat product supply to be shut down for days at a time when a plant is forced to be shut down. The result of this occurring is consumers looking for an alternative for protein when forced to, which opens the market for plant based and cell-cultured meat.

One thing the producers learned as the packing plants began to shut down and limit the amount of market pigs they were taking was that owning shackle space is key when packing plants are forced to shut down. Large commercial integrators that own shackle space or have large contracts with packing plants had priority over the small producer that raises pigs who rely on the open market to get their pigs sold. When packing plants chose not to buy open market pigs this left the small producers in a bind to either keep the pigs on the farm and feed diets to slow down the growth of the pigs, or worse simply get rid of the pigs humanely. So, in the future, what can producers do if this was to occur again? A potential option is to partner up with a marketing group that has control of a packing plant that can get their pigs into the plant even if they are limiting the amount of market pigs being bought.

As we have seen over the past year, one virus can change the culture and daily task of the entire world. As we move forward in the pandemic, we can't look at all the negative that has

occurred but learn from our experiences and continue to grow the industry that impacts people all over the world.