

Impact of pork processing problems felt by Hardin County producers

Posted on May 4, 2020



Mark Watkins at his farm outside of Kenton

Times photo/Kendrick Jesionowski
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The closure of numerous pork processing facilities nationwide because of the COVID-19 not only affects the supply chain of pork going to grocery stores and consumers, but it also impacts the livelihood of hog farmers, including those that raise pigs in Hardin County.

“It is an issue with the whole food chain,” Hardin County OSU Extension Agent Mark Badertscher said. “The processing plants are designed to process a lot of animals at a fast rate. There are a lot of workers close together in those plants and some plants have run into problems and have had to shut down. A big reason for the shutdowns is because of a labor shortage.”

Badertscher said that while there are a lot of pork producers in Hardin County, most of those are integrate producers meaning they contract with someone that provides the animals and feed and then the farmer houses and raises the animals to market weight.

Badertscher said that while he has read reports of hog farmers having to resort to euthanizing pigs in some parts of the country, he has not heard of that happening in Hardin County yet.

“I’ve been on state conference calls and don’t know of any instances locally in Hardin County where producers have had to euthanize any animals,” he said. “Euthanization is a last resort. Producers want to take care of their animals the best they can and are every, very careful with how they raise their animals. Hopefully it doesn’t get to that point. The problem is the barns are full of animals and they have to move them when they get to a slaughter weight.

Many producers will try thing to slow down weight gain in the animals

“They may try to slow down the rate of gain by changing their diets – not necessarily depriving the animal of any feed – but by changing the protein to slow down weight gain and allow them to keep them in the barns longer,” he said.

“Some sites can only do that for so long though because animals are still gaining weight. Some of them may have to take hogs that are larger than they typically would to market.

“Producers have it down to a science how they produce an animal and get it to market. Everything works like clockwork this changes that clock.

“Some have taken a hit because they are having to sell animals at a lower price than they would have in their traditional market channels. Others may have to move from one barn to another if another site is available.”

One Hardin County producer that has seen his operation affected by the processing plant closures, particularly the two in Indiana, is Mark Watkins of rural Kenton, who raises about 15,000 hogs throughout the county at any given time.

“It’s a very challenging situation because every week we’re sending pigs to market and right now there is no market,” Watkins said, noting the plant he sends his hogs to has been closed for the past week.

Watkins said typically if there is a temporary plant closure he can alter diet to control weight gain and hold back a barn full of pigs for a couple weeks, but after that the pigs start to get too big.

He added producers operate on a tight schedule in which pigs are raised and sent to market. He said when a barn is emptied, it is immediately disinfected and quickly filled with another group of pigs.

Because of the schedule they are on, many producers have been left with a backup of market-ready pigs they can't get rid of, he said.

"It's a fairly tight schedule that everyone operates on. It seems like from our perspective, the processors threw up their arms and just quit," Watkins said.

While he is adjusting the diet of the pigs that are market ready and he can double up the small pigs in pens for a little while, Watkins said he may have to make some tough decisions should the closure last more than a couple of weeks.

"You put all the time, effort and resources into raising them, the one thing we want to avoid is having to euthanize pigs," he said. "Hopefully the plants will reopen soon."

Watkins added he is not the only one facing these issues.

"This is a one of a kind situation where we were swept along in the current with what is happening now," he said. "We've never been in this situation before. It's something the whole country is dealing and it's a tough situation for the whole industry."

Doug Heilman, another pork producer east of Kenton, said he was fortunate enough to empty his barns prior to the plant closures and is currently going about business as normal hoping they will be reopened when he's ready to go to market again.

"I know we don't want this to stretch out," Heilman said. "This (processing plant closures in the livestock industry) is happening across the board. I know there are places where chickens are having to be put down. It's not like with cars where there are empty lots you can put them on until the supply chain reopens."

Heilman said that most plants run three shifts per day and can process roughly 1,000 pigs per day.

"So now with them closed there's no where to take the pigs," he said.

Heilman noted that he and other producers will make the adjustments necessary to get through the pandemic if it continues for a long period of time.

"We'll pull the horns back as much as possible. Some things may work out and others may not, but we'll get through it and things will work themselves out. We've been through rough times before. Back in 1998 we were getting 12 cents a pound for hogs that cost us 37 cents per pound to raise. We doubled down and worked hard and took some gambles and made it through."

Badertscher notes there is an effect on grocery stores and what consumers will see on store shelves.

“Some stores won’t be putting everything out at once or you may see different cuts of meat that you don’t normally see. Or you may see larger packaging or some cuts that people normally buy may be harder to find,” he said.