

AG NOTES
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LOTS OF SIDES

There are usually at least two sides to a story or issue. And in some cases, there can be several sides, all of them somewhat creditable.

That's the case of the impact of the COVID-19 on the food chain. Let me share some facts and numbers and you'll get the meaning of this title.

Let's first say that the case is made without saying for protecting human lives. Prevention and treatment are easy to talk about but very difficult to accomplish. This social distancing and face masks and restricted movement is something that none of us have experienced before. Look at the impact on families and communities, what with schools and businesses and events being closed affecting everything that we do or try to do.

But I want to share the farmer side of the story. (Imagine that, me taking the farmer side!) I'll share what has or is happening in various segments of agriculture, and what I see as impacts. I don't want to cause panic, because there is no need for that, but there can be some issues in the future, both short-term and long-term.

I've shared this before, but I'll remind you that we are the largest ag income county in the state. We have a strong livestock industry here, and it's the backbone of our farm income.

Since we have a large poultry industry, with a large weekly production and a large employee base, eyes have been shifted to how this industry is impacted by the pandemic. Some critics have made points about worker safety. I'll leave those discussions to the health officials and the local company. I am looking at it from the farm side.

The goal is to place several hundred thousand packages of healthy, wholesome poultry products onto the shelves in the local food markets. Any interruption of that process, either by slowing down the output or complete shut-down, will cause consumers to not have these food products available in the amounts necessary to assure that anyone wanting poultry on their diet menus can get them. Supply shortages of any kind is not good.

The side that is not seen here is the backup of live poultry that is ready for harvest. The question is what to do with the several hundred thousand birds that are market-ready each day. Each day of slowed or stopped processing causes the backup to enlarge. And in a tightly scheduled production system designed to assure the supply demanded by the public, the question then shifts to what to do with the over-supply of live birds, and the normal hatching of eggs to produce another day's group in the future. Who will face the costs of all of this? It's not just company income, what about the farmers who have loan payments, production costs, and family living expenses? They need to survive business-wise, like the restaurants and grocery stores who are suffering as well.

The same thing has stricken the beef business. With the harvest facilities workforce facing COVID-19 absences, this has reduced the harvest capacity by thousands of cattle each day. Beef prices on foot and on the rail over the past few weeks have fallen by about a third while boxed beef has risen due to the grocery market still being strong and meat counters in short supply because of the reduced output and over-purchasing. Someone maybe making windfall profits, but it's not the farmers with calves here in the fields and feedlots. And what do we do with the thousands of cattle that have no buyer? All while consumers are looking for beef in the stores?

The pork supply is in the same boat. One pork processor is completely shut down and this is causing a backup of hogs that are harvest-ready by the thousands of animals each day. The problem for

hogs is the same for finished poultry and cattle. Where do we hold them? Who pays the costs of keeping them on hand? And what about the next set of pigs that were born during all of this? Where do we put them?

Some milk processors told a few Tennessee dairymen in the past two weeks to dump their milk and that they would not be buying milk at the same level as in the past. The reason given was that since schools and restaurants are closed the demand for fresh milk for the fluid market is reduced and they have no storage capacity for a such a product with a short shelf life. And all of this during a shortage of milk in the coolers in the grocery markets.

So, what does a dairyman do? Folks, the cows have to be fed and milked twice a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. And the chickens have to be fed and watered, and the cattle have to be fed and watered. And the hogs have to be fed and watered. Every day. And keep in mind that there are more born every day to add to the problem.

In our population, over 98% of us does not farm. So those folks do not necessarily see that animal agriculture goes on every day, just on the day that they shop at the food market. And they don't see that the biology of these production systems can not be changed in short time frame, at least within the reproduction cycle of each of these species.

The farmer is there every day, with the expenses that go with the job, and the responsibility that goes with the job. He or she has to go on about business every day, because he or she fulfills an essential role. And that role is to feed the 98% that can't feed themselves, plus his or her own family and self. All of this in spite of COVID-19, or any crisis to come about.

My hope is that the framers who are facing these issues I just described can survive not just the COVID-19 but the financial ruin that many of them are facing. We need them to be in business when times are better, when schools are back in session and restaurants are back open and people are going about. Think about the shortages that could continue, not because there is a temporary hold up at the processors, but because there are fewer farmers in business that did not survive COVID-19. Then it can be a long-term shortage of food!

Think about it.