



*Action Steps*

## **Fixing COVID-19-related disparities and the national security threat of a fragile food system**

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### **Threats to meatpacking workers and national food security**

IN MAY 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began to strike the rural United States in a big way. By June, the per capita incidence of COVID-19 in some Midwest rural counties exceeded that of New York State, once the country's primary epicenter.<sup>1</sup>

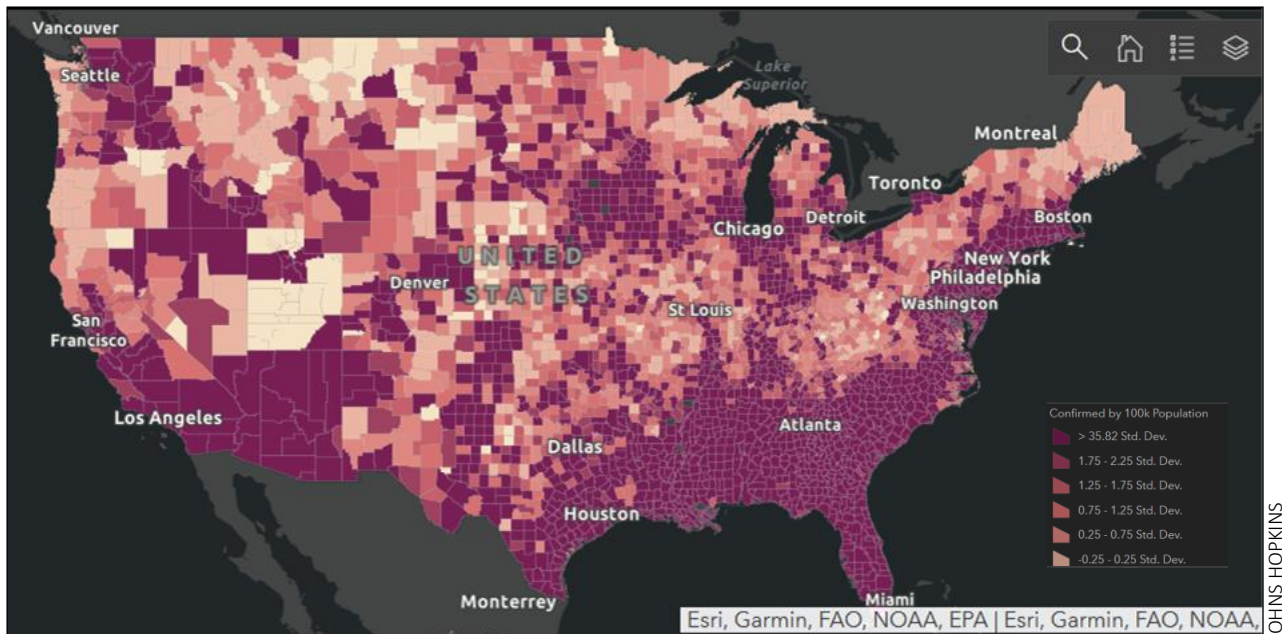
Some of the most significant rural outbreaks are happening in or near counties that host large meat processing plants, which are acting as COVID-19 incubators. As of July 17, there were at least 33,500 reported COVID-19 cases linked directly to at least 363 plants in 38 states, and 133 reported deaths in 43 of those plants.<sup>2</sup> Counties with or near meat processing facilities feature an average COVID-19 infection rate twice the national average.<sup>3</sup> Some states have been documented directing health agencies to stop reporting the number of workers exposed to COVID-19, making it harder to identify rampant exposure taking place in meatpacking plants.<sup>4</sup>

Why are meat processing plants so infectious?

In many plants, basic human rights are violated as workers are crowded together on the quick-moving livestock slaughtering lines, with little access to high quality masks.<sup>5</sup> In several notable cases, meatpacking companies even required their employees to purchase their own personal protective equipment (PPE) despite paying wages that put workers' families under the

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Confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100,000 population by U.S. county as of July 15, 2020. From the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

poverty line.<sup>6</sup> Currently, neither the CDC, nor OSHA mandate that meat processors observe special COVID-19 labor process guidelines.<sup>7</sup> Despite these risks, the federal government deemed meatpacking plants essential, yet has not allowed plant workers a pathway to legal status as U.S. citizens vital to our food system.

Just this month, the CDC reported that eighty-seven percent of the workers infected were racial or ethnic minorities.<sup>8</sup> The meat processing labor force consists mainly of workers who belong to two overlapping groups, immigrants (51.5 percent) and Latinx (44 percent).<sup>9</sup> Infected meat processing workers, living on low wages and more likely to be living with extended families under one household, more easily transmit the new coronavirus from their workplace to their families and communities.

In Marshall County of Iowa, where a JBS Swift plant fostered a COVID-19 outbreak and 10.7 percent of the population is Latinx, the incidence rate is a very high 2,659 per 100,000 population. In Colorado’s Weld County, where there was an outbreak at another JBS Swift plant and 30 percent of the population is Latinx, the number of cases is a comparatively less, but still large, 936 per 100,000 — and with a harsh 4.74 percent fatality ratio. In Luzerne County of Pennsylvania, where a contagion occurred at a Cargill facility and 13.8 percent of the population is Latinx, the number of cases per 100,000 is 934 — and the fatality ratio a severe 6.03.<sup>10</sup>

COVID-19 has exposed clear inequities in the large meat processing facilities. The pandemic has pointed out something else: our current food production system is a threat to our national security. The centralized plants have accelerated a public health crisis and destabilized an already fragile food production structure. The plants are the weakest link in a brittle supply chain — currently dominated by vertically integrated corporate oligopolies — that is jeopardizing nutritional food access for families across the country.

In the immediate term, basic changes in production in these facilities must be implemented. In June, the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) conducted a survey with meatpacking plant workers.<sup>11</sup> The workers responded they wanted more space between workers on the production line, more than a single mask, paid time off or sick leave, and transparency



around how many coworkers were sick.

Broader interventions are needed as well.

The agrofood supply chain needs to be structurally transformed. Large, centralized meat processing facilities targeting global markets should be decentralized into hundreds of smaller plants serving local and regional markets. The supply chain must be updated so that farmers, ranchers, and food consumers have fair, open, accessible and transparent markets. Moving to a more de-centralized food production system would stabilize food security concerns nationwide and offer more small business opportunities for talented and diverse cutting and packing entrepreneurs. Decentralizing meatpacking also will produce new markets for the next generation of farmers and ranchers.

### **Case Study: Nebraska**

WHERE DOES THE AGROFOOD SUPPLY CHAIN, in its present corporate and industrial form, come from? An abbreviated look at its recent evolution in Nebraska, one of the states in the Midwest hard hit by COVID-19, offers some answers.

In the 1990s, rural Nebraskans enacted county-level zoning to protect rural residences from the aggressive development of hog confinement systems. At the behest of agribusiness, Nebraska's legislature passed a so-called "livestock friendly" law in 2002 that shifted decision-making procedures over the placement and size of livestock operations from local zoning boards to state government. In 2006, the Nebraska Supreme Court nullified a 24-year-old constitutional amendment called Initiative 300. I-300 had banned out-of-state corporations employing the vertically-integrated industrial model of food production and ensured

independent family farms fair pricing and market access. More recently, the legalization of livestock ownership by large meatpacking companies put family-owned operations at a strategic disadvantage.

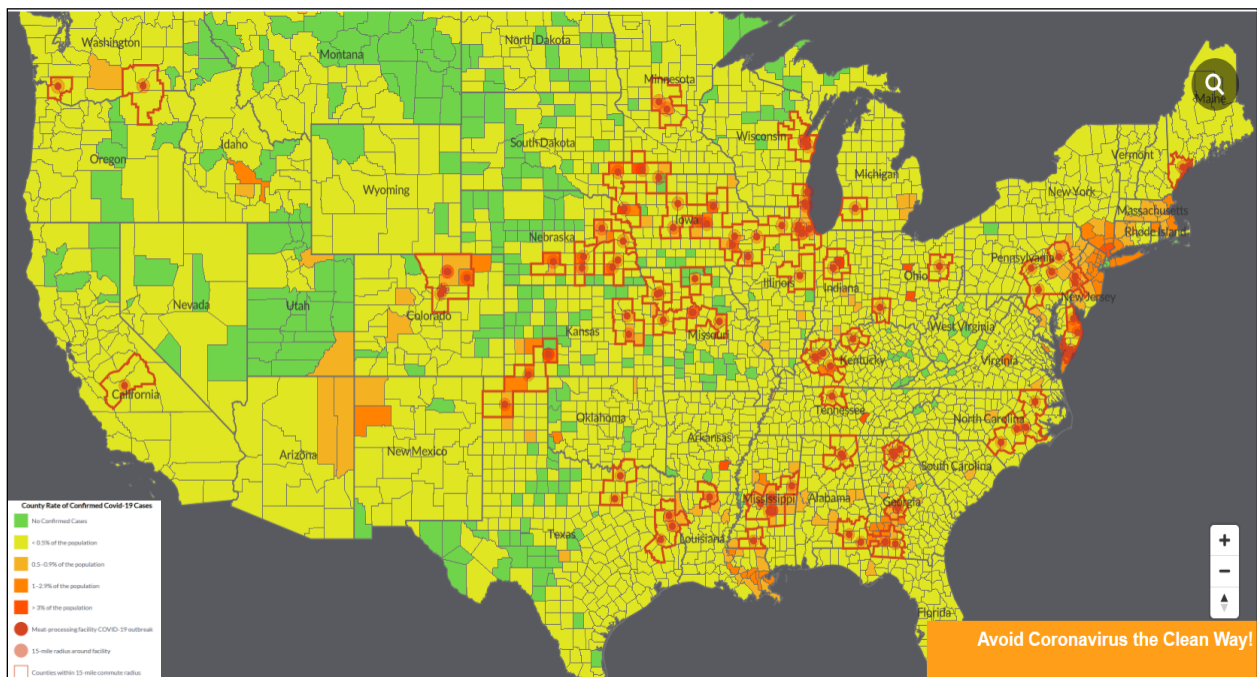
The agribusiness giants have parlayed their political influence in Nebraska into market control, progressively implanting a food production system in which farmers locked into dependent contracts lack the ability to adjust to unforeseen emergencies — be they slumping crop prices, an environmental disaster, or a public health calamity, all of which have had devastating impacts on Nebraska farmers and ranchers the past two years.

Federal policy missteps including the enactment of NAFTA, the neglect of anti-trust enforcement, and the debasement of country of origin labeling have further accelerated the inequity and abuse that is threatening independent farmers and ranchers, local processors, and consumers.

### Two solutions: regenerative production and regional food security

REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE offers farmers and ranchers a chance to lead the way in securing our food supply. By combining the improvement of farm biodiversity with the reintegration of holistic livestock grazing systems, regenerative practices focus on improving on-farm fertility. Restoring the natural productivity of the soil minimizes climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, another rising national security issue being neglected by industrial ag. In fact, it is projected that regenerative agriculture can globally drawdown 41-47 gigatons of CO<sub>2</sub> reduced/sequestered.<sup>12</sup> Even half of such an effect would mean an estimated \$135-\$206 billion lifetime net profit for regenerative farmers.

In the countryside of Nebraska and in many other states, regenerative farmers are organizing and are already scaling up their production and distribution networks to meet the needs of a growing local demand, including the demand of economically marginal urban



Red dots show meatpacking plants with COVID-19 outbreaks, March 23-May 6. Pink circles show average American commute of 15 miles around each plant and the red boxes those counties within the commuting field. Map by EWG.



PHOTO TOP LEFT: ALEXIS BONOGOSKY. OTHERS: NICHE MEAT PROCESSOR ASSISTANCE NETWORK

Livestock, such as these pastured cattle raised in Nebraska, can be processed at locally owned meat abattoirs or in mobile processors. State inspection and an influx of capital investment and state subsidies would permit regenerative farmers greater autonomy to respond to consumer needs during crises, including pandemics and extreme climatic events. A greater diversity of poultry and livestock breeds that are allowed to reproduce on-site would also help box out the more virulent agricultural and foodborne pathogens.

households who have traditionally lacked access to nutritionally dense food. Vigorous policy reform is vital for helping extend and deepen regenerative food networks so that young and diverse farmers, ranchers, butchers, and packers can transition into economically and ecologically sound independent business operations.

**Six actions now**

**1. Increase meatpacking worker protections, pay, and safety standards.** Since meatpacking workers are deemed as essential, they should be offered a route to U.S. citizenship. Meatpacking and other food processing workers are equal partners for achieving regional resilience on the foundation of a regenerative food system. Workers deserve a greater share of the profits they generate in the form of increased pay and benefits. They also are entitled to comprehensive health care that helps bolster their immunity to infectious diseases in advance of pandemics and offers them effective treatment in the event they become infected, especially since they are risking their lives to get food to millions of Americans and people who farmers serve in markets abroad. The federal government must mandate that industrial meatpackers implement genuinely hygienic labor protocols (that are health-driven rather than profit-driven), expand

their worker safety training, and hold accountable violators of these policies.

**2. Anti-trust legislation.** Proper anti-trust enforcement is essential for decentralizing the meatpacking monopolies and increasing opportunities for more independent processors. The enforcement of anti-trust laws also will enable independent family farmers and ranchers to decouple themselves from industrial agribusiness' stranglehold on the food chain, which has led to an uncompetitive and non-transparent marketplace.

**3. State inspection of meat processing.** The current system overregulates local meatpacking facilities, making it hard for farmers and ranchers to process their livestock. During the ongoing pandemic, farmers have been told they will not be able to process their livestock until late 2021 to early 2022 in many cases. A COVID-19 outbreak that persists into fall and winter this year could further disrupt local food accessibility, as well as the operations of small farmers and ranchers who depend on these processors to sell and market their livestock. A key barrier to local and regional market access for independent livestock producers is an inspection system that allows only four companies to retain control of the entire livestock market. Legalization of state inspection would aid independent regenerative producers in their efforts to supply nearby markets with locally produced pasture- and rangeland-raised meat, a necessary aspect of local food security in the likely event of other pandemics and climate disturbances.

**4. Farm subsidy reform.** By distorting markets in favor of vertically integrated corporations, the current farm subsidy structure discourages innovation by entrepreneurs motivated to institute a new regenerative food system — one that improves public health by increasing access to fresh and more nutritionally dense foods. Currently, the majority of Farm Bill subsidies support the production of low-quality foods developed by a few giant agrichemical, processing, and merchandising companies motivated by profit rather than the well-being of millions of urban consumers and rural residents. Federal investment in resilient, locally and regionally oriented agricultural production must stabilize food supplies in times of disaster, invest in new, independent processing facilities, equip thousands of processing workers in all meatpacking facilities with the PPE needed to protect them from unnecessary exposure to infectious diseases, and help transition young, diverse farmers immediately into regenerative farming.

**5. Resuscitate state-level corporate farming bans.** Until recently, state-level corporate farming bans had long been a staple of Midwestern agricultural states. By protecting independent farm and ranch businesses from being bankrupted by multinational investor-owned companies that have benefited from special treatment by government, corporate farming bans allows for a competitive and healthy marketplace.

**6. Grain reserves.** Much neglected Farm Bill initiatives such as managed grain reserves should be revived to put the independent farmer or rancher in a position to increase food security in times of national disruptions like pandemics. A properly run reserve not only assures the independent producer a fiscal safety net, it also protects the food security of mass populations whose access to distant grain sources is disrupted.

With these six interventions we can immediately alleviate the worst outcomes for producers, the broader community, and the country more widely. We also can make sure another outbreak, increasing flooding and other climate disturbances, and any other emergency never gridlocks

our food production again. Community resiliency, agility, and farmer autonomy are the way forward.

July 27, 2020

**Pandemic Research for the People** is a crowd-funded effort aimed at conducting research on questions that will directly help communities around the world during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. For more information or to donate to the project, please visit the PReP website: <https://www.prepthepeople.net/>.

**Contact.** Feel free to contact PReP Rural at [graham@gresolve.com](mailto:graham@gresolve.com) or [preporganizer@gmail.com](mailto:preporganizer@gmail.com).

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