



KANSAS CITY FOOD CIRCLE

The KCFC Update: Summer 2009 – Electronic Extra

Swine Flu Ancestors Traced to U.S. Animal Factories

According to Dr. Michael McGreger, Director of Public Health and Animal Agriculture for the Humane Society, factory farming in the U.S. seems to have contributed to the development of the current swine flu strain.

Six of the eight viral gene segments in the current virus came from North American swine flu strains that have been circulating since 1998.

The deadly 1918 flu pandemic was triggered by an H1N1 avian flu virus, which jumped the species barrier from birds to humans. In the U.S., it was passed on to pigs and became one of the most common causes of respiratory disease on North American pig farms.

In 1998, a more virulent strain was found in a North Carolina pig factory that had picked up three human flu genes. By the end of that year, the virus had acquired two gene segments from bird flu viruses as well, probably from nearby poultry operations. It became a never-before-described "triple reassortment virus."

It spread nationwide among pig factories because huge corporations routinely ship pigs all over the country for breeding or slaughter. According to a new European study, this pool of viruses is the predecessor to the Mexican swine flu outbreak.

The 1998 North Carolina strain occurred just after the state's pig population ballooned to ten million from two million in 1992. That's when Murphy Farms (now owned by Smithfield Foods) adapted the intensive confinement model used to raise chickens to their pig farms.

Last April, the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production concluded that industrialized animal agriculture posed "unacceptable" public health risks: "Due to the large numbers of animals housed in close quarters... there are many opportunities for animals to be infected by several strains of pathogens, leading to increased chance for a strain to emerge that can infect and spread in humans."

McGregor notes, "with massive concentrations of farm animals within whom to mutate, these new swine flu viruses in North America seem to be on an evolutionary fast track, jumping and reassorting between species at an unprecedented rate." The next pandemic may appear in the U.S. For the full text of McGregor's article go to: www.hsus.org/farm/news/ournews/swine_flu_virus_origin_1998_042909.html.

USDA Rescues Pork Producers

While flu viruses mutate and party amidst the vast pool of hapless hogs in animal factories nationwide, the USDA has come to the rescue - of the pork producers, that is.

On March 31, the USDA decided to buy \$25 million of pork to help the industry weather the current economic crisis. (The meat was donated to nutrition and food assistance programs.) That's in addition to the \$50 million USDA spent for the same purpose in April of 2008.

Now the National Pork Producers Council is back at the trough. They are requesting expenditures of another \$50 million to counteract the negative publicity from the recent swine flu scare. In addition, they want the government to develop a comprehensive surveillance program among hog factories to provide an early warning for emerging diseases that might affect human and animal health. Let's see. When you find yourself in a hole... why, just keep digging!

Milk Labeling Restrictions Defeated in Kansas

A small group of dairies in Kansas, who still use the genetically engineered growth hormone rBST, developed by Monsanto, have been trying to get restrictions imposed on retailers who sell milk labels advertising "rBST free."

This type of milk has become increasingly popular among consumers. Last year rBST proponents tried and failed to get a bill through the Kansas Senate. Then over the summer they tried to get rules imposed by the Kansas Department of Agriculture.

This effort was met by a massive outpouring of criticism both by local opponents, like the KC Food Circle and the Kansas Sierra Club, and by national organizations like Food & Water Watch, Consumers Union and Physicians for Social Responsibility.

This year they finally succeeded in getting a weakened, though still onerous, measure through the Kansas legislature. Fortunately, former Governor Kathleen Sebelius, who is now Secretary of Health and Human Services in the Obama Administration, vetoed the bill.

The legislature decided to pull the offending language, and the consumer's right to know is preserved, at least for now. Don't be surprised, though, if this issue comes back next year. Our thanks to KC Food Circle members and friends who contacted their legislators and Governor Sebelius.