

# Don't Blame the Pigs

---

Tue May 5, 2009 10:53pm EDT

By dan.mitchell - [The Big Money](#)

The pork business is in deep muck these days as it fights the fallacy that its meat might contain [swine flu](#). But the industry is also facing a second allegation that has spread as far as the virus: that the new strain started on a factory hog farm in Mexico half-owned by Smithfield Foods (SFD), the world's biggest pork producer.

Bloggers and opinion journalists around the globe are advancing this idea as if it were true or, at least, likely. But nobody *knows* where the strain came from. Smithfield's farm in Mexico might be the point of origin. Yet it's also possible it all began in Asia, in southern Mexico, in the United States, or just about anywhere else. The media claims are based on mere speculation—and an understandable disgust at corporate pig sties.

Consider the facts. In February and March, a bunch of people got sick in the town of La Gloria, Mexico. La Gloria is where a child was found to be among the first victims of the [H1N1](#) virus—a novel mix of pig, bird, and human influenzas. And the town is near the site of a large hog operation run by Granjas Carroll, an operation that is half-owned by Smithfield. Nobody knows what sickened the other people in the area.

The cluster of reported illnesses near a large, concentrated animal feedlot operation, or CAFO, invites investigation. It suggests the site could be the point of origin of the strain, said Tara Smith, an assistant professor of epidemiology at the University of Iowa. But that doesn't mean it's certain. "It's possible, but right now we don't have the evidence for that," she said. "People are assuming too much."

The assumptions started just as the outbreak surfaced to the wider public early last week. A couple of food-activist bloggers picked up on a post at the Biosurveillance blog. The post, by James Wilson, chief scientist of Veratect, which tracks disease outbreaks, cited local media reports of increased illness in Veracruz. That's the state where La Gloria and the Granjas Carroll site are located.

In February and March, about 60 percent of the local population reported that they were ill with flulike symptoms. Nobody knows whether this was [swine flu](#). Residents told local papers they thought the hog farm was to blame. And people in La Gloria also named the site. According to Wilson, a "municipal health official" told local media he believed the disease might have come from "a type of fly that reproduces in pig waste," as the scientist put it.

But Wilson offered this caveat: "And to be crystal clear, the way we used this information was to simply flag an event as worthy of closer scrutiny and higher awareness, as there was *absolutely no proof of true involvement of this company* in the outbreak—a proper epidemiological investigation is required to prove such links." (Emphasis mine.)

Yet the bloggers ran amok with the material. Paula Hay of the Peak Oil Entrepreneur blog came to this definitive conclusion: "So now it looks like Big Ag is not only responsible for poisoning people directly with contaminated foods, but also for unleashing a deadly pandemic." And Tom Philpott of the popular environmental news site Grist picked up on Hay's post and wrote his own, bearing the headline: "Swine-flu outbreak linked to Smithfield

factory farms." That link was supplied by Philpott himself and consisted of nothing but speculation. He also complained that "the possible link to Smithfield has not been reported in the US press."

There was nothing to report. I talked to several epidemiologists. They all said such a link would be impossible to identify without a complete investigation, which could take weeks. Two of them cited as sources in various excoriations of Smithfield said, on condition of anonymity, that their statements were mischaracterized to fit the authors' arguments.

Sometime in the following few days, the headline on Philpott's post was changed, without explanation, to "Swine Flu Epidemic *could be* linked to Smithfield factory farms." (Emphasis mine.) And he has continued to write posts based on his claim that Smithfield is to blame. To be fair, Grist has also published several posts countering Philpott's and accusing him of "jumping to conclusions."

Other blogs and media outlets picked up the story. "Swine Flu May Come From Corporate Pig Poop" was the headline on a *Washington Independent* blog post. *Democracy Now!*—a program that runs on some nonprofit radio stations—aired a context-free interview with Robert Wallace, a University of Minnesota geography professor who blames the outbreak on industrial agriculture and globalization. He calls the outbreak the "NAFTA flu."

Word spread to Europe. The *Times* of London posted the most definitive headline yet: "Mexico outbreak traced to 'manure lagoons' at pig farm." But the article offered no evidence that the outbreak had been "traced" anywhere. It simply noted there had been an outbreak of illness in La Gloria in recent months. Mike Davis of the *Guardian* opened his column by declaring the virus was "probably conceived in the faecal mire of an industrial pigsty." He offered zero evidence for this statement but went on to describe how the virus is spread once it's unleashed.

To be sure, there is plenty of reason for investigators to probe whether hog farms in the area around La Gloria are the point of origin. Scientists have warned for a while that the huge amounts of waste created by lightly regulated livestock operations could spawn an epidemic.

But that doesn't mean it happened here. The pork sector, including Smithfield, may be hard to defend, thanks to its long-standing practice of fouling the environment, among other atrocities. But that doesn't make it automatically guilty for the start of [swine flu](#).

Epidemiologist Smith is an expert in the causes of chronic communicable diseases. She said it's not even known whether the reported illnesses in La Gloria were influenza—or any disease at all. They could just as easily have been caused by the vile gases spewed from CAFOs. Or something else entirely. "It wouldn't even necessarily have to be something infectious," she said.

For its part, Smithfield refuses to talk to me. But CEO C. Larry Pope went on the attack late last week, as the price for hogs tumbled by 12 percent and Smithfield stocks dropped by a similar amount. (Before recovering as flu fear subsided. Wholesale pork prices, though, are still way down.) Last Thursday, Pope penned a "letter to employees" actually meant for public consumption, complaining about the "unrestrained Internet media." And he appeared on CNBC to shoot down speculation. He noted that no pig had been found to be infected with [H1N1](#). (Since then, pigs in Canada were discovered to be sick, but even there, it doesn't mean a CAFO was responsible.)

Pope said that Smithfield's tests of hogs and workers at its Veracruz site have turned up no infections. Further results "should be available in a few days." And health officials from Mexico and the United States "have also inspected our farms in Veracruz and found no evidence of H1N1 flu at all." The company continues to note that it regularly immunizes its pigs against flu. But that means little since H1N1 is a new strain. And the industry's insistence that it is scientifically "impossible" for a human to catch the flu from a pig is just plain wrong, scientists say.

For that matter, so is the industry's insistence on its innocence. CAFOs are horrible places—so horrible they *should* be the first suspects in such an outbreak. Regulation and inspection are far too light. But blaming them before the facts are in is reckless.