

The Great Swine Flu Cover-Up

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Mexico has been considered the laboratory of globalization since it initiated the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994. In April of 2009 a deadly virus germinated in that laboratory, finding ideal conditions to move quickly into a global pandemic.

The first outbreaks of the H1N1 virus, or "swine flu," took place in a small town in the state of Veracruz. Carroll Farms, the massive industrial farm animal production facilities co-owned by Smithfield Foods and AHMSA of Mexico is located near La Gloria, in the municipality of Perote. A local boy, Edgar Hernandez, gained the dubious distinction of becoming the first confirmed case. After weeks of denying any connection between the farm and the illness, the state governor finally called for an independent investigation into possible linkages. That investigation has not been made public or even carried out so far as is known.

The governor's announcement followed a long line of denials regarding the role of the hog farm—or hog farms in general—in the outbreak of the A/H1N1 virus in Mexico. Unusual respiratory diseases began showing up in communities surrounding the industrial feedlot in early March, with some indications dating back to January. Local health authorities attributed the outbreak to the open-pit lagoons of manure and biological wastes surrounding the farms.

On April 5, authorities declared a health cordon in the area but failed to carry out tests to determine an exact diagnosis of the strange illness showing up in local residents. They discovered that 60% of the community's 3,000 people reported an undiagnosed respiratory disease. Meanwhile, the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) determined on April 17 that two patient samples from San Diego were a new H1N1 virus. On April 21 the CDC issued a dispatch to its Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report to warn of the discovery. The San Diego cases were then linked to the suspicious cases popping up in Mexico and the alert went out of a possible pandemic.

Emergency measures in Mexico were not declared until April 23. On April 25, the World Health Organization (WHO) director-general declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. On April 27, with the epidemic already rapidly spreading throughout the country and the press and public pressuring for accurate information, the Mexican government announced that little Edgar Hernandez was the first confirmed case of a new swine flu transmitted to and through humans.

On June 11, the WHO declared the virus a pandemic. The latest WHO report shows 162,380 confirmed cases worldwide and 1,154 deaths as of July 31. The Americas where the virus originated is the hardest-hit with 1,008 deaths, concentrated in the United States, Mexico, and Argentina.

Defending the Factory Farm

Experts have long warned that "industrial farm animal production" (IFAP) leads to potentially serious human health impacts. A tragically prophetic study done by the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production of 2008 concludes, "... one of the most serious unintended consequences of industrial food animal production is the growing public health threat of these types of facilities. In addition to the contribution of IFAP to the major threat of antimicrobial resistance, IFAP facilities can be harmful to workers, neighbors, and even those living far from the facilities through air and water pollution, and via the spread of disease."

The study continues, "Workers in and neighbors of IFAP facilities experience high levels of respiratory problems, including asthma. In addition, workers can serve as a bridging population, transmitting animal-borne diseases to a wider population."

As residents of La Gloria protested the stench and pointed to the hog farm as the source of their sickness, Mexican authorities went out of their way to divert suspicions that Smithfield's Carroll Farms had anything to do with the unusual illnesses being reported. Although state health officials sprayed the village of La Gloria to kill off swarms of flies coming from the company's nearby open-pit manure lagoons, explanations lit on anything but the hog farm.

A Carroll Farms representative called the fact that the first swine flu case was located within a few miles of the pig farm "an unfortunate coincidence." Reportedly, Carroll Farms sent samples from its herd for testing at some point soon after the outbreak and both the company itself and the Mexican government absolved Smithfield pigs from any role in the epidemic.

To reinforce the "coincidence" thesis, international health authorities began a concerted effort to hide the pig. In fact, there is no dispute in the scientific evidence that the virus got its start on a hog farm.

Citing the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, Scientific American points out a starting point that the politicians preferred to ignore: "What is clear thanks to the hard work of virologists is that this particular strain of flu got its genetic start on U.S. hog farms back in the 1990s."

Ruben Donis, chief of the molecular virology and vaccines branch at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, stated in an interview with Science magazine:

"We know it's quite similar to viruses that were circulating in the United States and are still circulating in the United States and that are self-limiting, and they usually only are found in Midwestern states where there is swine farming." Asked if the virus had swine origins, he replied, "Definitely. It's almost equidistant to swine viruses from the United States and Eurasia. And it's a lonely branch there. It doesn't have any close relatives."

For years scientists have known that pigs incubate and mutate viruses and many have warned that "factory farms" where large numbers are kept in close quarters create a perfect breeding ground for the rapid evolution of disease. The massive use of antibiotics means that viruses seek mutations resistant to the medicines. In the past, few cases of swine flu passing to human transmission were reported but it has long been known that it is possible. This virus posed a particular risk because of its virulent capacity for human-to-human contagion.

Since the early days of the outbreak, evidence has piled up on the swine origin of the disease. Co-author of a key report in *Nature*, biologist Michael Worobey said, "The current strain evidently spread without anyone noticing it for 10 years," referring to spread among pig populations. [Science News quotes](#) him, concluding, "Across the genome, this is something that came from pigs ... We need to spend more energy looking at what's in pigs."

The consensus is that the H1N1 virus is a mutant form of swine flu, human seasonal flu, and bird flu. In itself, it is not lethal, but it leads to complications of "atypical pneumonia." The pneumonia is atypical because it occurs out of season and because victims tend to concentrate in the middle age range—unlike regular pneumonia that picks off the very young and the very old, deaths of this virus tend to be within the 20-40 range.

As health organizations struggle to confront the pandemic, animal health experts call for more action on the swine side. Perez notes, "We can do all the surveillance we want in humans, but if we really want to prevent pandemic influenza ... a fundamental change in efforts on the animal health side has to be made." This expert piece of advice, repeated on many fronts, has been largely ignored. A June 17 [Nature editorial](#) points out one of the main reasons:

"... animal-health specialists tend to work through government agencies, whose primary mission is to promote and protect national and international livestock and meat trade. This focus on commerce can sometimes lead to conflicts of interest, as well as some policy positions that border on denial."

Protecting the Pig

The World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) is foremost among those international agencies in denial. Despite the scientific consensus detailed above, on June 9, it issued a memo noting that "OIE strongly opposed the initial naming of the novel virus as 'swine influenza.' Such a name incorrectly implied that pigs were implicated and may have led to the imposition of more unjustified trade barriers against several countries which had human cases. To date there is no scientific evidence to suggest that there was ongoing circulation of this virus in pigs ..."

This report came out well after H1N1 was discovered in a hog herd in Alberta, Canada infected with the virus and ignores the proven genetic swine components. By moving back and forth between species barriers, the risk of this virus genetically re-assorting into an even more lethal version is very high, according to health researchers.

The swine flu connection to Carroll Farms might never be scientifically proven. It would seem to be a classic case for the mammoth UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Reports that the FAO was sending a team to Veracruz came out in the press the first week of May. But the report has not been made public. The FAO has very little information on the pandemic after May and nearly all its press releases since the outbreak are focused on "protecting the pig sector."

Its first press release dated April 27, echoed the industry objective to "protect the pig sector from the novel H1N1 virus by confirming there is no direct link to pigs," rather than adopting the scientific method of gathering evidence first and arriving at conclusions later.

The next press release stepped up efforts to protect the global pork industry, announcing an official language change—obediently adopted by most of the world's media—designed to disassociate the epidemic from what the FAO considered wrongly maligned swine operations:

"... there is currently no evidence to suggest that the novel human-to-human transmitted H1N1 influenza virus is circulating in pigs in Mexico or anywhere else in the world," reasserted FAO Chief Veterinary Officer Mr. Joseph Domenech. "It is for these reasons that FAO, the World Health Organization, and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) agreed to no longer refer to 'swine flu' but instead to 'Influenza A/H1N1.'"

The World Health Organization, the OIE, and the FAO have done far more to stave off a reduction in pork consumption or trade sanctions, than to get to the bottom of the pandemic. When the Canadian pig outbreak destroyed the argument that the disease was not circulating among swine, the FAO did release a statement on May 4 calling for greater surveillance.

The FAO press release says "all cases of porcine respiratory disease are recommended to be immediately reported" and "it is also recommended to inform OIE and FAO." As seen in the wording, the problem is that in most countries surveillance and reporting on animal disease is voluntary and industrial farm animal producers are not even subject to obligatory reporting of virus outbreaks that are known to have the capability of spreading to the human population. Neither Mexico nor the United States have laws that require reporting swine flu.

The United States currently uses a totally voluntary animal tracking system (NAIS). Canada does require reporting of disease outbreaks in farm animals, which probably accounts for why Canada was the first place that the A/H1N1 virus was detected in pigs.

One of the reasons oversight is so lax on factory farms is that a stark distinction exists among agencies and regulations pertaining to human health and animal health. It seems that although the virus leaps species barriers with deadly ease, bureaucracies cannot. When asked why the FAO assumed that the source of contagion on the Canadian farm was a worker returning from Mexico rather than the pigs infecting the worker, FAO spokesperson Northoff replied that the organization could not investigate to confirm the human-to-animal link because the FAO "only works on animal health issues."

Animal health is generally considered under agricultural rather than health regulations. Despite the known health risks to human populations, regulations remain voluntary and woefully behind the times. The Pew study concludes with the recommendation: "A mandatory premise and individual animal or lot registration should be in effect by 2009, with an animal tracing capability in place by 2010." There seems to be little forward movement on this recommendation even after the H1N1 outbreak.

NAFTA and the Globalization of Disease

NAFTA unleashed the spread of industrial livestock farms in Mexico by creating investment incentives for transnational companies to relocate operations there. The "race to the bottom"—where companies move production to areas where environmental and health restrictions and enforcement are low, is exemplified in livestock farming.

Smithfield had more than its share of legal problems stemming from its operations in the United States before pulling up stakes and moving part of its operations to Mexico. Most recently it announced a decision to reject a \$75 million dollar settlement on claims brought in Missouri by residents complaining of the stench. On Aug. 8, 1997 a federal court judge in Virginia imposed a \$12.6 million fine on Smithfield Foods for violation of the Clean Water Act. In September of 1999 an appeal upheld the ruling.

In 1994, the year NAFTA went into effect, Smithfield established the Perote operations with the Mexican agribusiness AMSA (Agroindustrias Unidas de México S.A. de C.V.). In 1999 it bought the U.S. company Carroll's Foods for \$500 million and began rapid expansion of its operations in Perote.

The facilities near La Gloria maintain open-pit manure lagoons for waste disposal because it's cheaper than covering them. These present not only health risks, but considerable environmental harm. Journalist Talli Nauman reports that, "The FAO has been scrutinizing Mexico's pig pens since as far back as 2000, when its experts launched a pork project in central Mexico to study the effects of Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) on the environment." A program was instituted to cover the lagoons in exchange for carbon credits. The Commission for Environmental Cooperation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, an agency charged with analyzing the relationship between NAFTA and environmental impacts, released a study on the pig farms concluding that "the proper handling of this large quantity of CAFO animal waste is critical to protecting human health and the environment."

Smithfield's Carroll Farms did not enter the program. Nauman reports that by covering the lagoons, the original 14 carbon reduction projects registered in the country were expected to reduce annual methane emissions by the equivalent of 621,513 tons of carbon dioxide. Critics of the program point out that the measure does not resolve the many other health, environment, and social threats posed by the large livestock production model.

Integrated Risk Management or Integrated Risks?

It's ironic and inexcusable that the most integrated region in the world responded so poorly to the recent epidemic. One of the main selling points for the extension of NAFTA into the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) was that a working group was preparing integrated response to epidemics that would make all North Americans safer. In fact, this was one of the few publically announced activities of the secretive working groups that primarily devote their activities to making it easier for companies like Smithfield and Tyson to do business throughout the continent.

The SPP North American Plan declares that it provides a framework to accomplish the following:

- Detect, contain, and control an avian influenza outbreak and prevent transmission to humans;
- Prevent or slow the entry of a new strain of human influenza into North America;
- Minimize illness and deaths; and
- Sustain infrastructure and mitigate the impact to the economy and the functioning of society.

The plan supposedly established mechanisms to coordinate actions, monitor outbreaks, and supervise animal farms.

Mexico, despite being a poor country with greater risk of disease, had not received the technology needed to immediately analyze flu strains and therefore had to send samples to the Canadian Health Ministry and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta for analysis. About a week was lost in this process.

Where was this plan when Perote was reporting illness and a local epidemic way back in March? Has this group done serious research on the risks of industrial livestock production? Why did the CDC take nearly a week to respond to reports of the Mexican epidemic?

The answers lie in what Davis refers to as the "global political clout" of the livestock transnationals. Another hint can be found in this phrase from the SPP announcement: "Central to the plan is a North American approach that undertakes measures to maintain the flow of people, services, and cargo across the borders during a severe pandemic while striving to protect our citizens."

As is the case with all of NAFTA, the top priority is business as usual. While closing the borders is not the answer, an investigation into the root causes of the epidemic must lead to a full accounting of the risks of globalization and industrial farming. The rapid global spread of the disease is also attributable to a system where people and their food cross borders constantly. Poor countries with poor health run the greatest risks and yet the current system gives their concerns short shrift and little resources.

The net result of NAFTA in Mexico has been the integration of risks, rather than the integration of risk-prevention. A misplaced priority on profits over human health in the context of a globalized world led to this pandemic and has blocked efforts to prevent another, more lethal epidemic in the future.

A People's Movement for Biosafety

The whole system must be carefully analyzed and changed to stop the globalization of disease and prevent another deadly flu outbreak. The effort must start with the investigation and regulation of large livestock farms, leaving open the possibility that this model must be scrapped completely. Now that the origin of the virus is known, factory farms must become a center of research.

Mexico's experience as the epicenter of the swine flu pandemic provides an opportunity to expose a system that didn't work. Without elaborating on each, here is a list for further collective analysis:

- Self-monitoring of industry and globalization provisions that enable polluting industries to locate where laws and enforcement are lax encourage practices that threaten health and the environment, like open-pit manure lagoons, non-reporting of animal illness, cover-ups, and other factors that contributed to the swine flu epidemic.
- The centrality of foreign investment in the Mexican economy creates a climate where transnational corporations with large investments can exercise coercive power over government agencies on all levels.
- NAFTA failed to promote a strategically important technology transfer to Mexico in the health field and others, and has proved a disincentive to national research and development.

All analysis must include a gender perspective. Women made up 56% of the deaths from the swine flu in Mexico and pregnant women are at greater risk of severe illness and death. Since the H1N1 flu attacks a middle age range, this poses a serious challenge. Also the compromised immune systems of many Mexicans who live without adequate health and nutrition—a condition that includes a disproportionate number of women—contributes to flu mortality rates.

GRAIN reports that "Communities like La Gloria are on the front line of resistance to pandemics, but they are totally excluded from official responses or strategies ... The link between factory farming and the growing threat of pandemic diseases in humans is undeniable, and even if governments and international agencies continue to toe the corporate line, local struggles against factory farms have assumed their rightful place at the center of the global response to emerging diseases."

As these people's movements grow throughout the world, we can expect more pushback from corporate factory farmers. Citizen networks need to organize to carry out and publicize independent studies, draft national and international policy proposals for greater regulation, conduct popular education campaigns on the risk of factory farms, and organize to wield greater force in changing the dangerous conditions posed by these farms to the entire world.