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We talk about it every single day. We see it on the news, it's the subject of small talk with our neighbors, and it has turned our world upside down. Yep, you guessed what I'm referring to: coronavirus. Although we're tired of talking about COVID-19, it's important to keep producers and consumers educated on how the virus has affected our world, and how we can recover. The coronavirus has caused a national meat demand decrease, international trade troubles, and exposed murky meatpacker activity.

The decrease in demand for meat across the country, specifically beef, is the most identifiable repercussion coronavirus has brought to the table. As we know, restaurants, hotels, cruise lines, and more have been severely limited to the business they can conduct, or shut down altogether. According to BEEF Magazine, "Tourism is significant to American beef producers, as the hotel and restaurant trade is a lucrative customer for high-quality beef. Cruise lines losing current and future revenue will not be loading up on the best cuts for a while." (Dittmer 2020) These circumstances obviously mean a shift downward in demand for beef across the nation. The demand decrease is something many can see and is easily recognizable; conversely, US trade troubles are an underlying factor that the average citizen isn't aware of.

There was a time when coronavirus was NOT the topic of conversation, but the US-China Trade War was. The trade war was an extensive debate between the United States and China regarding trade deals and tariffs. By the end of the war, China agreed to buy \$36.5 billion worth of farm goods from the United States in 2020. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 and weakening meat demand in China, they only managed to import \$3.35 billion in American agricultural goods within the first three months of the year (Bloomberg 2020). This doesn't put them on track to purchase the \$36.5 billion that was promised at the beginning of the year and

displays how the coronavirus has caused significant strain on trade relations. COVID-19 has affected American exports, and it's affecting American imports, too. Brazilian meat producers plan to take advantage of surging prices and tight supplies in America. Brazilian meat producers, including JBS-SA, plan to ramp up shipments of beef to the US (Bloomberg 2020). Trade troubles are a large underlying problem brought on by corona; moreover, the virus exposed murky meatpacker activity.

Meatpackers have not been transparent with their actions during the coronavirus pandemic. They have refused to share national or cumulative data regarding COVID cases within packing plants. Additionally, plant workers receive little to no information regarding how many of their coworkers have tested positive for the virus. Some meatpacking companies have provided personal protective gear and wide-scale testing; however, workers say the reforms have come too late (Douglas 2020). As a result, these companies have put many lives in danger, including the lives of beef producers who unload cattle at the packers. Coronavirus cases aren't the only thing meatpackers have been shady about. Economists and beef producers across the country are wondering why meat prices continue to skyrocket, while live cattle prices are at an all time low. Packers blame this pricing gap on the fact that plants have had to shut down due to COVID-19. This excuse doesn't exactly add up when the United States has yet to see a true meat supply shortage. The national pandemic has caused and exposed suspicious actions taken by meatpackers; luckily, there have been many positive changes made in an effort to offset the damage done by COVID.

In an effort to ensure more US-raised beef is consumed, President Donald Trump has mentioned terminating trade deals that involve importing cattle. He didn't go into detail, but

experts hope he's referring to the recently opened Brazilian beef import market (Bloomberg 2020). In order to ensure American beef producers are receiving fair prices, Agricultural Secretary Sonny Perdue announced that the Department of Justice is looking into the Big Four (Tyson, JBS, National Beef, and Cargill are commonly known as the "Big Four" meatpackers of America) to investigate price fluctuations and possible market manipulation (Nylen, Crampton 2020). An alliance between producers and packing plant workers has been formed and demands that workers be provided wide-scale testing, personal protective equipment, and social distancing (Douglas 2020). The USDA has provided options for producers to stay afloat during these uncertain times. According to the USDA's website, the government has launched the CARES Act, along with other financial help options provided through the FSA, NRCS, and RMA.

The coronavirus has made a detrimental negative impact to the American beef industry. This can be seen through a national meat demand decrease, international trade troubles, and exposed murky meatpacker activity. It is frightening to think of the future; however, I encourage my fellow producers refrain from standing frozen in fear. There are options for recovery, so take action and remember who we are. The beef industry claims some of the most resourceful, hardworking, and hardy people in the entire world. We will survive these trying times, just as those before us survived trying times of their own.

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