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The US Meat Supply Crisis

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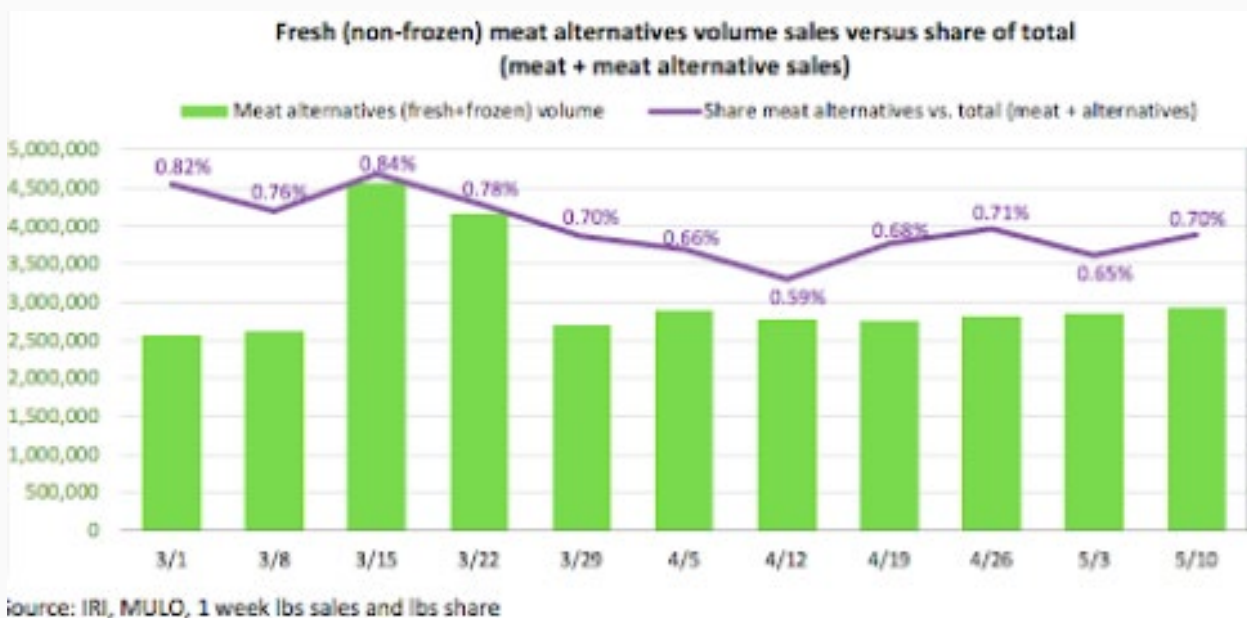
The US Meat Supply Crisis

The US meat supply chain is in disarray. At least [205](#) US slaughterhouses have had COVID-19 outbreaks, infecting at least [18,500](#) workers — about one in five of the industry's workers. Over [7,000](#) workers at Tyson Foods alone have been infected, including [over 1,000](#) at just one Iowa slaughterhouse. Meat is in short supply, with Walmart, Kroger, and Costco all limiting meat purchases.

This has attracted huge media attention — the [most](#) slaughterhouses have gotten in a decade. In the last week, both [USA Today](#) and the [Washington Post](#) have printed long-form articles on the plight of slaughterhouse workers and the negligence of their employers. Even the industry's euphemistically titled “depopulations” are now attracting mass media attention, including from [ABC](#), [CBS](#), [Fox](#), [CNN](#), and [CNBC](#).

Some are starting to connect these problems with factory farming — or even meat eating itself. Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) recently endorsed Sen. Cory Booker (D-NJ)'s [bill](#) to ban the largest factory farms. Last week alone, [CNN ran four pieces](#) on how to eat less meat in response to meat shortages, while Jonathan Safran-Foer's NYT [op-ed](#) on “the end of meat” [trended](#) on Twitter.

This has led [some to argue](#) this is a unique opportunity to reform factory farming, or even to end it. Is it?

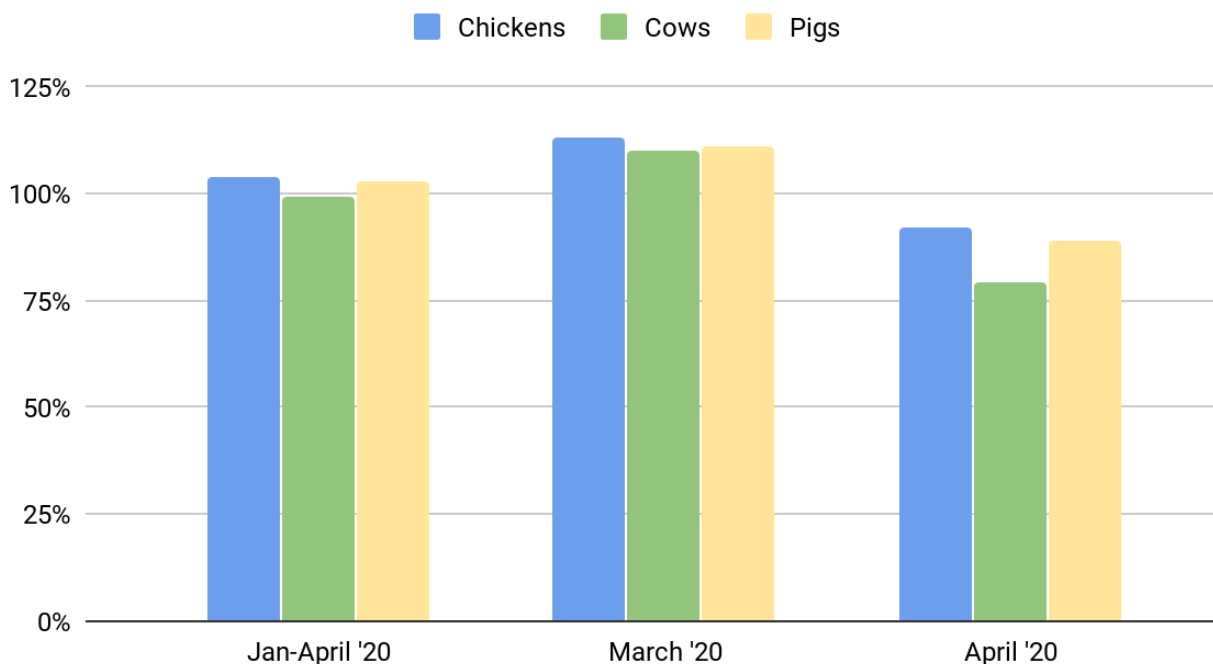


Retail US plant-based meat sales are at historic highs. But their market share has fallen slightly since March, due to a similar boom in conventional meat sales. Source: [Meatingplace](#), citing analysis by 210 Analytics based on IRI retail scanner data.

A dose of reality is in order. Plant-based meat retail sales have soared since the lockdown began: up by about [60%](#) (Nielsen), [70%](#) (IRI), or [90%](#) (SPINS) year-on-year. But so have conventional meat retail sales. The result is that plant-based meat's market share have may actually [declined slightly](#): from 0.82% of total US meat retail sales by weight on March 1 to 0.7% on May 10. (Most outlets cite sales by dollar value, which fell from 1.5% to 1.27% in the same timeframe. But for animal advocates weight is more important, since it's a better proxy for how many animals alternatives are displacing.)

Meanwhile, US slaughter numbers actually rose in March. They've since fallen, but mainly because slaughterhouse slowdowns have prompted farmers to kill millions of animals themselves, even as the pork industry [certifies](#) to the US Department of Justice that pig farmers “generally lack the knowledge, equipment, and facilities needed to humanely euthanize large numbers of animals.” The resulting killings, which are not covered by the federal humane slaughter law, have involved predictably [barbaric methods](#).

2020 US slaughter numbers as a % of 2019 slaughter numbers



US animal slaughter totals for Jan-April are similar to 2019 totals. A dip in April was largely offset by a rise in March, though it may suggest lower slaughter levels for the next few months. Sources: USDA livestock slaughter reports for [April](#) and [May](#); poultry slaughter reports for [April](#) and [May](#).

Nor does the limited evidence available suggest that the public is drawing the connection between meat supply problems and the factory farming system or its alternatives. Although Google searches on the meat packing industry [surged](#) in April, searches on [veganism](#), [factory farming](#), and [plant-based meat](#) did not. (Though searches on plant-based meat have [grown hugely](#) over the last few years.)

And while it's heartening to see Sen. Warren endorse an anti-factory farming bill, after [previously endorsing](#) a bill to ban the use of terms like “soy milk,” she's still only the bill's second Senate cosponsor.

Meanwhile, [14](#) bipartisan senators and [48](#) US representatives signed on to a recent letter calling for more aid for pork producers killing their pigs, while [18](#) senators signed on to a request to bail out chicken producers and slaughterhouses.

Still, the present crisis may erode several aspects of factory farming's long-term political and economic power:

- **Bipartisan political support.** The meat industry has long cultivated support across the political spectrum: the recent chicken and pork industry bailout letters were signed by both some of the most conservative senators, like Sens. Tom Cotton (R-TN) and Jim Inhofe (R-OK), and some of the most liberal, like Sens. Jeff Merkley (D-OR) and Chris Van Hollen (D-MD). But the meat industry is alienating both sides in this crisis. It alienated the left by lobbying President Trump to force the reopening of unsafe slaughterhouses, a move condemned by [union leaders](#) and [top Democrats](#). And it alienated the right by reducing its payments to farmers even as it raised prices at retail, which led [16](#) Republican senators to call for an investigation of anti-competitive meatpacking practices — a call since [endorsed](#) by President Trump.
- **The alliance between producers and packers.** The meat industry trade groups derive much of their power from their claim to represent millions of independent farmers. This claim was always dubious: the National Chicken Council's board of directors, noticeably absent from its website, [appears](#) to include no chicken farmers (only industry executives). But the COVID crisis has exacerbated the split. Rural media is [full of reports](#) of pig and cattle farmers furious that meat packers like Tyson have left them on the hook for losses, even as these packers report continued [profitability](#).
- **Cheapness.** Factory farming's greatest strength — and plant-based and higher-welfare competitors' greatest obstacle — is how cheaply it can produce meat. The crisis has forced it to internalize some of the true costs behind that cheapness, like the cost of running crowded, unsanitary slaughterhouses. And while it's now trying to outsource those costs to taxpayers through bailouts, it's facing increasing resistance. At the very least, the next Democratic Administration is unlikely to allow faster slaughter line speeds or lax workplace safety inspections. (As of last week, OSHA, the federal workplace safety agency, had visited just [four](#) of the 197 US slaughterhouses with COVID cases.)
- **Reliability.** The meat, poultry, and seafood industries produce about [16%](#) of the calories and [43%](#) of the protein Americans consume. Yet they account for [89%](#) of the COVID cases in US food production, and much of the disruption of the food supply chain. By contrast, no plant-based meat plants have yet had COVID outbreaks, likely because they're much more automated facilities. And plant-based meat companies have proven more adept at moving products to retail from foodservice, which made up most of Beyond's sales and almost all of Impossible's before the crisis. This bolsters the case for protein diversification, which would reduce future supply shocks.

None of these changes will save animals from the current awful mass killings, nor lead to Congress banning — or even regulating — factory farming any time soon. But our struggle is a marathon, not a sprint. I hope you and your loved ones are safe and healthy in this tough time.