

Critics Slam Trump's Executive Order Requiring Meat Plants to Stay Open

Despite the closure of more than 20 meatpacking plants due to COVID-19, experts say the U.S. food supply is not in peril.

By [Trevor Bach](#), Contributor April 30, 2020, at 4:34 p.m.

IT WAS AN UNUSUAL NOTE of alarm, even by the radically altered standards of COVID-19: "The food supply chain is breaking," [wrote John Tyson](#), chairman of Tyson Foods, in a full-page ad published Sunday in the Washington Post, New York Times and Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

Tyson ran the ad after his company closed multiple meat processing plants because of coronavirus outbreaks, resulting in millions of pounds of unprocessed beef and pork. Tyson argued the workers were essential, and called on the government to help find a "way to allow our team members to work in safety without fear, panic or worry."

On Tuesday, after widespread media coverage of the Tyson ad and rampant speculation over a looming food shortage, [President Trump signed an executive order](#) mandating that meat processing plants stay open amid the pandemic, a move designed partially to offer liability protection to companies as their employees worked amid potentially dangerous conditions.

While the president argued the order was necessary to protect the food supply chain and national "critical infrastructure," labor advocates slammed the directive for potentially endangering employees, with one workers' rights group branding it a "potential death sentence." The United Food & Commercial Workers International Union, the country's largest meatpackers union, urged the administration to provide plants with protective equipment and enact a series of enforceable safety measures to protect workers from the virus, which had [killed more than 61,700](#) in the U.S. as of Thursday afternoon.

"While we share the concern over the food supply, today's executive order to force meatpacking plants to stay open must put the safety of our country's meatpacking workers first," UFCW president Marc Perrone [said in a statement](#).

Weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic some meat processing plants, where dozens or hundreds of employees typically work together in tight, confined spaces, emerged as contagion hot spots. In mid-April, [nearly 300 workers at a Smithfield pork plant](#) in South

Dakota tested positive, representing the largest single COVID-19 outbreak in the country at the time. Around 180 cases were tied to a [Tyson pork plant in Iowa](#), and [more than 100 workers](#) were likely infected at a Tyson beef plant in Washington state.

Throughout the country at least 20 meatpacking workers have died because of the virus, according to the UFCW, and more than 5,000 have been infected. Twenty-two meatpacking plants have closed at some point within the past two months, according to the union, representing a 25% reduction to the nation's pork processing capacity and 10% reduction to beef processing capacity.

The closures have forced farmers, suddenly unable to sell product, to "depopulate" – aka kill – their own animals before sending them out for processing. They have also stoked fears over meat shortages, anxieties that have been amplified by the industry. For example, Kenneth Sullivan, the CEO of Smithfield Foods, warned that the closures were "pushing our country perilously close to the edge in terms of our meat supply."

But while the plant closures might mean temporary spot shortages of particular cuts of meat, experts caution that fears of widespread scarcity are being dramatically overblown.

"No, there's no shortage of food," says Yossi Sheffi, director of the MIT Center for Transportation & Logistics. "There will not be a shortage of food. The food supply chain of the United States is very robust."

The food industry, like all industries, is adapting to dramatic economic shocks wrought by COVID-19, including a drop in large-scale purchases from institutions like schools and corporations. But the American food supply chain is well positioned, Sheffi says.

"A huge part of the food that is grown in the United States is being processed in the United States and being sent to supermarkets in the United States," he says. "We are not dependent on China – it's not like PPE (personal protective equipment)."

The new executive order, while swiftly condemned by labor rights activists, may also prove futile. Individual facility managers, says Robert Handfield, distinguished professor of operations and supply chain management at North Carolina State University, are already making their own decisions over how best to adapt practices to stay safe.

They would also be unlikely to keep an unsafe plant open strictly because of an order from the president. "It does absolutely nothing," Handfield says of the order. "It's Trump showing off in the press again."

Workers have also expressed skepticism. "I just don't know how they're going to do it when there are people dying and getting really sick," one employee of a Tyson plant in Iowa [told CNN](#). "Who's to say people are even gonna show up to work?"

