



Rock County STAR HERALD

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Farmers reeling from coronavirus economy, now Smithfield closing

By Lori Sorenson

Smithfield Foods closed its Sioux Falls pork processing plant over the weekend after more than 230 workers tested positive for coronavirus.

The plant is one of the nation's top pork processors, and it has many in the ag sector worried about food supply chains.

"It is impossible to keep our grocery stores stocked if our plants are not running," said Smithfield President and CEO Kenneth Sullivan in a statement.

"These facility closures will also have severe, perhaps disastrous, repercussions for many in the supply chain, first and foremost our nation's livestock farmers."

The Sioux Falls facility processes



roughly 14,000 hogs per day, and its closure left suppliers scrambling for alternate pork buyers.

"... if you take away the processors ... It's not like I can deliver a steer to your front yard and say, 'Here's your beef.' You're going to see a disruption in the supply chain."

— Peter Bakken, Rock County Farm Bureau president

"It's not good," said Kevin Barnhart, Rock County Pork Producers president. "The sooner we can get

Smithfield back online, the better ... before the next plant goes down."

Barnhart, Luverne, works for Schwartz Farms, Rock County's largest hog supplier, which trucks thousands of animals per week from Rock County barns to Smithfield.

"Where will they go? Good question," he said Monday.

In addition, several other local operations truck finished hogs to Smithfield.

The hogs that were en route to Sioux Falls when the plant closed Sunday went to other processors in the region, such as JBS in Worthington, Tyson in Storm Lake, Hormel in Austin and Prime Pork in Windom.

But these plants are already operating over capacity to absorb

other truckloads intended for Smithfield, which is closed for at least two weeks.

Barnhart supports closing the plant for human safety, but he sees the backside of the hog market when a processor that large is shut down.

In addition to farming out loads to other processors, he said growers have suddenly put the brakes on production.

"We've adjusted rations to maintenance levels to slow growth so we can buy ourselves a week or two," Barnhart said.

"We're also co-mingling weaned pigs with larger animals and double-stocking the nursery."

None of these options are ideal,

Farming economy/see page 8

Rock County has first two confirmed COVID cases

County seeks better flow of information from MDH officials

By Lori Sorenson

Rock County learned of its first two confirmed cases of coronavirus this week as numbers continue to climb across the state and nation.

As of Tuesday, there were no more additional local cases, and local emergency management officials continued to prepare for an anticipated "surge" of patients weeks from now.

In addition to securing personal protective equipment for "front line" workers — medical workers, first responders, fire departments and others — local public health officials are working on streamlining information.

According to Jason Kloss, environmental health manager for Southwest Health and Human Services, when a Rock County resident tests positive, goes to the Minnesota Department of Health which notifies local public health workers and the patient.

Information about the patient's town, where they work and their specific address is not made known to the public, although law enforcement and first responders are made aware

Coronavirus update/see page 5



Mavis Fodness photo/0416 Easter Blizzard

Easter Sunday brings winter weather

Last week's spring field work came to a halt Sunday when a spring blizzard left about a half foot of snow in its wake as it passed through Rock County. With the county already under the state's shelter-in-place order, the blizzard did not interrupt Easter Sunday services for area residents as almost all the county's churches were able to worship online. The forecast the rest of the week calls for milder, more spring-like weather.

City offers economic relief through utility bill deferment

By Lori Sorenson

The Luverne Economic Development Authority will provide relief for local businesses suffering economic hardship as a result of temporary closures for coronavirus prevention.

Qualifying businesses — nearly 80 non-residential accounts — will see a credit on their May utility statements equal to half of three months worth of their average bills.

Members of the LEDA, which met via conference call Monday morning, approved the "Stop Gap Utility Deferred Loan Program" in an attempt to lessen the economic blow of lost business during state-mandated closures.

Director Holly Sammons used the example of an account with a \$200 average monthly bill. Three months is \$600, so the one-time credit would be \$300.

"And the best part is, we calculate it for you; you don't have to do anything," she said. "We wanted to make this as reasonable and easy as possible."

State and federal relief programs have complicated application process-

"The LEDA recognizes the adverse impact these orders may have on small businesses within our community while still waiting for state and federal programs to become available."

— Holly Sammons, EDA

es, and relief may not arrive for several months. That's why Luverne leaders wanted to do something in the interim.

Qualifying businesses are any listed under Gov. Tim Walz's executive orders 20-04, 20-08, and 20-20 mandated to close in order to slow the spread of the virus. The list is long and includes

Utility bill relief/see page 8

Area legislators seek solutions to virus struggles, ask for local citizen stories

By Mavis Fodness

As Rock County enters the third week of Minnesota's stay-in-place mandate, area state legislators are reaching out to various groups to discuss legislative action amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Sen. Bill Weber and Reps. Rod Hamilton and Joe Schomacker hosted several videoconferencing calls with school and county leaders last week, and they will talk with city administrators this week.

"The role that we play is that we can send information to the governor about the issues that residents are concerned about," Hamilton said.

Since March 13 Gov. Tim Walz has issued nearly three dozen executive orders, starting with a peacetime emergency declaration in response to the pandemic reaching Minnesota.

Other orders temporarily closed schools, non-essential businesses and cautioned residents to stay at



Sen. Bill Weber (right) and Joe Schomacker, both Luverne, hosted videoconference meetings with local community leaders this week.



home. The governor extended the original two-week stay-at-home order an additional four weeks, to May 4. And on Monday he extended it to May 13.

These orders have resulted in economic hardships, and legislators have shared these stories with the governor, who has made some changes as a result.

Rep. Schomacker is a Luverne business owner and his family's appliance store was not originally classified as an essential business and

closed during the original two-week stay-at-home order. He said his potential customers simply went to larger stores across the border where there weren't state restrictions in place.

"We weren't prepared for, obviously, having something like this to where we would have thought out these policies and inconsistencies ... had we, we would've had a much better response to it than what we've had,"

Legislators seek stories and solutions/see page 3

