

Nebraska businesses to reopen even as COVID-19 infections at meatpacking plants rise at five times the national average

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The millionaire Republican governor of Nebraska, Pete Ricketts, has declared that multiple businesses will reopen under specific restrictions in counties throughout the state next Monday, May 4, even as cases of COVID-19 continue to rise in the state's meatpacking and processing plants. Nebraska is currently one of eight states without a state-wide stay-at-home order, with the governor ignoring the advice of medical professionals and epidemiologists.

Meatpacking plants throughout the state of Nebraska have been particularly hard hit with spikes of COVID-19 cases. According to the *Omaha World Herald*, confirmed coronavirus infections are rising at a rate 15 times that for the rest of Nebraska and 5 times the national average in the meatpacking communities of Hall, Dawson and Dakota Counties.

Despite the growing outbreak in one of the state's basic industries, salons, tattoo parlors, restaurants and childcare centers will be allowed to reopen on May 4 and elective surgeries will also be able to resume on this date.

Hall County holds Nebraska's fourth most populous city, Grand Island, with roughly 6,000 people. As of April 27, there were 877 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the county and 19 deaths. At least 237 of the confirmed cases in the Grand Island have been linked directly to the JBS beef plant in town.

JBS USA is one of the largest meat-producing companies in the United States and is Grand Island's largest employer, with 3,600 workers. The Brazilian-owned company saw its profits surge by 332 percent in the first quarter of the year over 2019 rising to \$485 million, while most of its workers make poverty wages in fast-paced and unsafe conditions.

As has been seen across the US, once the virus infects a few people in an individual meatpacking plant, it soon spreads rapidly. On April 10, there were 84 confirmed cases in Hall County, and by April 20, there were 531 cases. An undisclosed number of people working at Tyson plants in the city of Omaha, the state's most popular metro area, with

over 800,000 people, have tested positive.

These meatpacking plants overwhelmingly employ immigrant workers, mostly Hispanic, Burmese, Sudanese and Somali. At the same time, these plants have also been the focus of many Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids over the last 10 years, including a sweep of over 1,200 immigrants in Grand Island in 2006. Immigrant workers are often the most exploited layers of workers in the food industry, facing constant threats of retaliation from the company and ICE.

The working conditions in these plants are often fast-paced and brutal. In Nebraska, they have been the focus of criticisms from advocacy nonprofit group Nebraska Appleseed. The organization claims workers face impossibly fast work speeds, limited bathroom access and rest breaks, improper medical treatment of work-related injuries, lack of sufficient training, and low wages.

Governor Ricketts and Nebraska's political establishment have largely ignored the response from the scientific and medical community to the spread of COVID-19 across the state, especially the meatpacking facilities. Instead, the Ricketts family is pushing the interests of Wall Street to reopen the US economy. Governor Ricketts is a scion of billionaire Joe Ricketts and an heir to the billionaire Ricketts dynasty (net wealth \$5.3 billion). The elder Ricketts grew his enormous fortunes out of a process of parasitic financial mergers and acquisitions of retail securities brokerage firms, eventually forming the Omaha-based TD Ameritrade.

The Ricketts family has also been influential in shaping US politics and pushing it further to the right, donating to both the Democratic and Republican parties. Despite initially opposing Donald Trump in the 2016 election, they have cultivated close ties to the Trump administration and are now part of an advisory group to the White House called the "Great American Economic Revival Industry Groups." The aim of the panel is to reopen the economy despite the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic to broad sections of the

population.

Joe Ricketts has donated over \$855,000 to Trump's joint fundraising committee with the Republican National Committee. In 2017, Joe Ricketts shut down publications DNAInfo and Gothamist after a unionization vote in an act of political censorship. Todd Ricketts, brother of the governor, heads the RNC finance committee and was appointed to the White House's advisory panel as part of the financial services industry group.

Governor Ricketts has also ignored the advice of medical experts. Teresa Anderson, director of the Central District Health Department, which oversees Hall as well as two additional counties, has raised the need for a shelter-in-place order.

According to the *Daily Beast*, Anderson made the following statement at a briefing the first week of April: "There are many folks among us who believe that a shelter-in-place would be an effective way to separate people for a two-week period, thereby reducing the spread. And both the medical community, the mayor, and the public health requested that of the governor. He doesn't think this is the right time to do it—so that's his responsibility."

Dr. Gary Anthone, the state's chief medical officer, has also noted that Nebraska's current hot spots are in large manufacturing facilities, according to the *Omaha World Herald*. "If there's one thing that might keep me up at night," he told the newspaper, "it's the meat processing plants and manufacturing plants."

Ricketts claims that hospitals are not at capacity currently and therefore restrictions on business can be eased. He claims testing will go from the 600-800 residents tested per day that is currently happening to 3,000 per day. Moreover, he has said testing data will only be up to speed by the end of May or early June, not May 4, the date he proposes to reopen businesses.

The Nebraska legislature's response in early March to the pandemic was initially to suspend sessions, stating they did not want to put themselves in danger of coronavirus. They reconvened on March 23 to finally pass emergency pandemic funding that had been delayed since its initial introduction in January.

According to the *Omaha World Herald*, at the beginning of April, Democratic state Senators Tony Vargas, Megan Hunt, Justin Wayne and Mike McDonnell signed a letter to Ricketts demanding a shelter-in-place order. Since then, state Senator Hunt has tweeted about Ricketts's opposition, but has commented little on the situation facing workers in the meatpacking facilities.

Senator Vargas stated, "I don't think we can tell yet" whether workers are being adequately protected, according to the *Marietta Daily Journal*. He added, "What we know is

it's not business as usual."

Vargas has also given token support for a letter to meat processing plants that was written by the Heartland Workers Center (HWC), a nonprofit that claims to advocate for workers' rights.

In the letter, HWC makes suggestions for keeping the plants open such as adopting additional sanitation and health-screening practices, expanding personnel and leave practices that encourage self-quarantine to contain spread. But the letter then goes on to praise the companies, noting, "JBS and Cargill, in particular, have been leaders in taking strong actions in all three areas. It is our hope that other employers will be able to follow suit."

Considering JBS's record of mistreating workers across the country, the toothless appeal to the companies by Vargas, the Democrats and the nonprofits would not bring any additional level of safety to the workers in these facilities.

United Food & Commercial Workers Local 293, the union that covers 10,000 food workers at JBS, Cargill, Nestlé, Omaha Steaks, Tyson and Smithfield plants throughout Nebraska, has also taken no actions to protect the workers it claims to represent. The union has made appeals to the US Department of Agriculture to protect workers while keeping workers on the job without any safety measures in place.

Ricketts has stated he will not ease restrictions on the counties that are currently most afflicted, such as Hall County. The meatpacking plants in Omaha and surrounding Douglas County, however, are also seen as a potential hot spot in the coming weeks.

When Ricketts announced the plan to reopen businesses in early May, Dr. Angela Hewlett, medical director of the Nebraska Biocontainment Unit, told the *Omaha World Herald* on April 26: "We're still seeing an increasing number of cases. Yes, we haven't seen a huge surge in cases in Douglas County in particular, but we're definitely seeing that in other parts of the state," adding, "I don't want to have things open prematurely when there's a chance that we could see a large spike in infection."



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