

**Testimony for: Carmen Rottenberg, Managing Director, Groundswell Strategy**

Chair DeLauro, Ranking Member Cole, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the meat and poultry industry's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. My name is Carmen Rottenberg. I am the Managing Director of Groundswell Strategy, a consulting firm I founded upon leaving USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) in March 2020, after 13 years of career service. FSIS is the public health regulatory agency responsible for *ensuring* that the United States' commercial supply of meat, poultry, and egg products is safe, wholesome, and correctly labeled and packaged. I was honored to lead the Agency and its nearly 10,000 employees, most of whom work in meatpacking plants every day, as Deputy Administrator and then Administrator from 2016 until I left the Agency on March 13, 2020. Incidentally, that was the same day COVID-19 was declared in the United States as a national emergency.

In the weeks and months that followed my departure from USDA, when the industry faced its most critical challenges, I consulted regularly with the meat and poultry industry as individual companies and trade associations sought to engage with government on how to protect their employees. From the very early days of this pandemic, I witnessed a meat industry that has been focused on the health and safety of its workforce, while working hard to ensure the continuity of food production, which is critical to our national security. And yet, there is still no wide-scale effort by the government to vaccinate food and agricultural workers. Vaccinating our frontline workers *now* is a real and tangible way we can protect them from COVID-19. The federal government must take the lead in ensuring this happens.

In March, as Seattle and California began to experience community spread of COVID-19 and current and former government health officials began to warn that the U.S. was moving past

the point of containment of the virus into a posture of mitigation, trade associations and many individual meat companies reached out early and often to the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Health and Human Services (CDC and CDC's National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health), the Department of Labor (including OSHA staff at all levels), state and local public health departments, and state departments of agriculture. The industry used this early informal guidance from all corners of government and began implementing controls – employee health screenings before and during shifts, education and training to employees on the importance of staying home if sick, notifying the health department if they became ill with COVID-19 symptoms, and constant reminders about the importance of handwashing (at work and at home). All of this was consistent with what our nation's public health experts knew about how to mitigate the spread of coronaviruses. All of this was consistent with what career scientists and medical professionals in the federal government were advising. Formal guidance would not come from CDC and OSHA until late April.

In the early days, there were few experts more relied upon than Dr. Douglas Trout, a 30-year veteran of NIOSH's Hazard Evaluation and Technical Assistance Branch. His advice and guidance, ability to identify solutions to the most complicated scenarios, and steadfast availability to stakeholders early in the pandemic is illustrative of the cooperation and collaboration between dedicated career public servants and industry that has led to illness reduction in the meatpacking industry. In November, MeatingPlace published an interview with Dr. Trout about the meat industry's response to the pandemic. Here's what he said:

Right at the start, what happened across the country is that the meat and poultry facilities reached out to their local resources first, which means their occupational health or medical [experts]. Through their local and state health departments, they reached out to the CDC, and NIOSH is part of the CDC. We actually – months ago, going back into early March – were providing technical assistance over the phone [and] in webinars to state and local health departments, and also to the companies...while we were attempting

to develop our guidance...I think they responded in the appropriate way, which is to reach out to their local resources. Local and state resources reached out to CDC, and the guidance was posted on the web – which was created with NIOSH and OSHA as a collaborative document – was formally issued on April 25<sup>th</sup>. But prior to that, we were interacting with the companies and health departments with the best available knowledge at the time.

When asked about “key weaknesses” that he saw when touring beef, pork, and poultry plants during this pandemic, Dr. Trout had this to say:

I wouldn't call it a weakness, because there was no reason, necessarily, to have the occupational safety and health controls to prevent person-to-person spread of a virus like SARS-CoV-2 prior to this epidemic. This is a brand new issue for them, which led to using, again, sound occupational safety and health practices, sound infection controls...as we went out into the field, the data that we gathered from touring plants, from talking to health departments, from talking to companies – those are things that led to the published guidance [from] the CDC/OSHA.

And his guidance for what to do next to protect workers?

I would say ‘continue’ [rather than] ‘more needs to be done’... right now, we don't have any evidence that other interventions – other than what we've already put out in our guidance – need to be done.

As the virus spread rapidly through communities in the spring and summer, and the government learned that (unlike other coronaviruses) COVID-19 could be asymptotically transmitted – it became apparent that more needed to be done to control the spread, especially in workplaces deemed essential. As the government learned more about the virus, industry rose to the challenge. The guidance to the meatpacking industry – finally published in late April – included prevention measures already employed by much of the industry.

After spending an estimated \$1.5 billion (and counting) on comprehensive mitigation and control measures, we see the success of the meat and poultry industry's COVID-19 response when we look at the reduction in illness in meatpacking plants over time. According to data on the Food and Environment Reporting Network (last accessed 2/21/21), as of February 21, average new daily COVID-19 case rates for meat and poultry workers are nearly 95% lower than at the pandemic's peak in the industry. Case rates in the general population are more than four times higher than rates for meat and poultry workers. (*See Appendix A.*)

Key protections implemented by the meat industry include:

- Temperature checks and health screenings before and during shifts – many companies have hired entire medical teams to ensure screenings are accurate and employees have on-site health care support, testing, and information.
- Information and education, in multiple languages, for workers on safe practices at work, at home, and in the community.
- Face masks, face shields, and personal protective equipment (PPE). Early in the pandemic, there was a supply shortage of face masks and other PPE. Where PPE was not immediately available following the change in course by federal government scientists, employees were reimbursed the cost of making their own masks. This was also true for FSIS inspectors who were reimbursed by USDA.
- Enhanced sanitation in break rooms, lunchrooms, locker rooms, high-touchpoints, and other common areas. Meat processing is a highly regulated industry. Sanitation is critical to an effective food safety program. Enhanced sanitation of non-food production areas was among the earliest efforts employed by meat and poultry establishments.
- Physical distancing. As workers in many industries have contemplated how to achieve maximum distancing while also producing product, the meat industry has succeeded in a multi-layered approach, which includes distancing when feasible and numerous other protections when distancing is not possible. Some establishments have added additional space to existing facilities to ensure greater room for employee movement.
- Physical barriers between workstations. As part of this multi-layered approach to engineering controls, physical barriers have been installed to separate employees on the line, in break rooms and locker rooms, at healthcare stations, and in other areas of the plant.

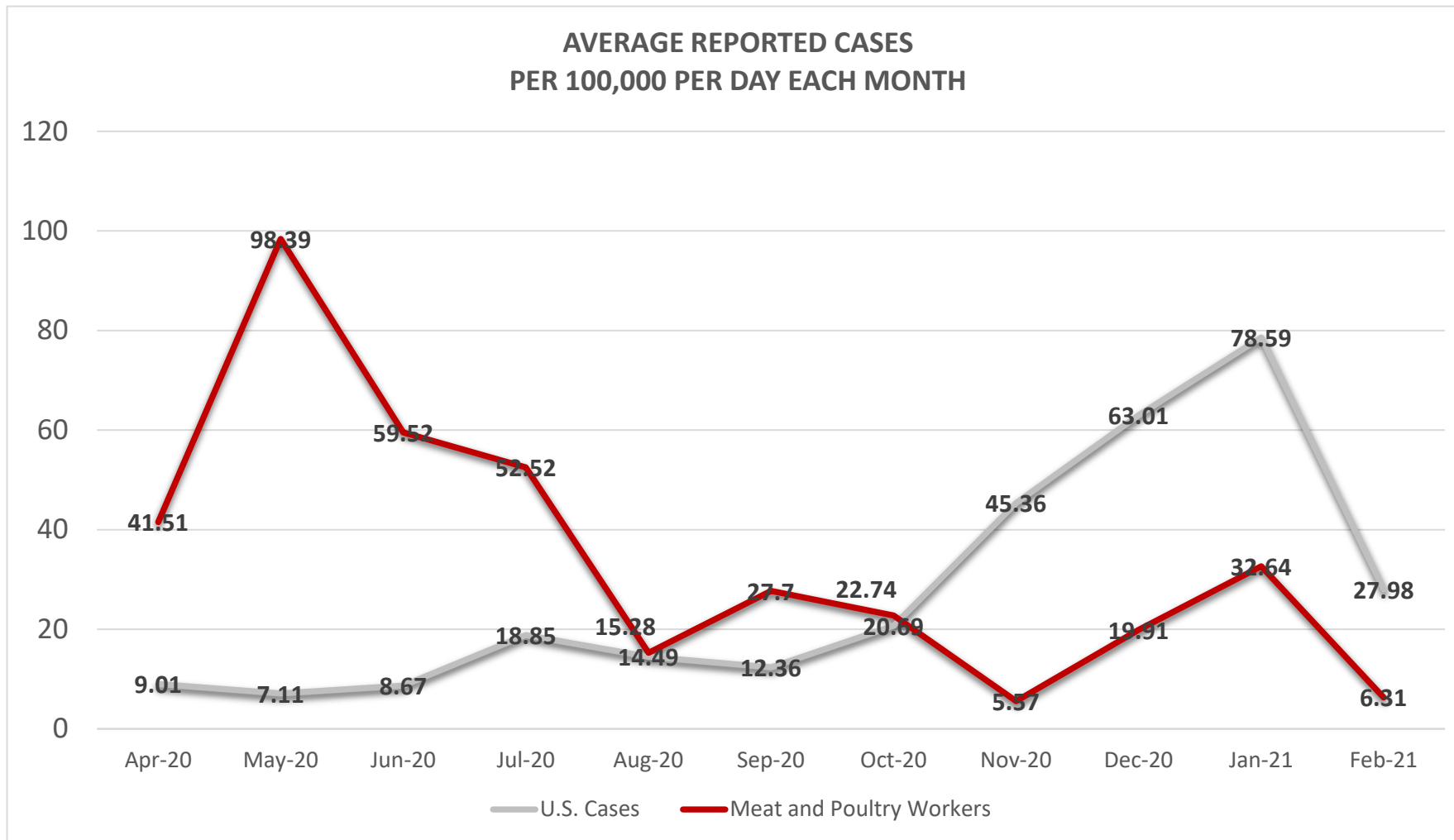
- State of the art air sanitation and ventilation systems.
- On demand testing, including testing as a monitoring tool.
- Increased access to health services, preventive care, and promotion of vaccine readiness.

The updated worker safety guidance issued by OSHA in January of this year, reaffirms the protections the meat industry implemented. Most of the meatpacking industry has implemented the measures in the Biden administration guidance, and more.

In the years to come, there will be plenty to dissect about how COVID-19 took hold in our communities. From early delays in testing, which led to public health ignorance about the community spread, to initial refusal by the public health community to recommend masks to anyone but health care workers, to lack of awareness of asymptomatic spread until the virus had firmly taken root in this country, there is much to learn from early missteps. While focusing on our past failures as a nation can inform our future successes, we cannot lose sight of current challenges facing the food and agricultural workers. There is so much work to be done.

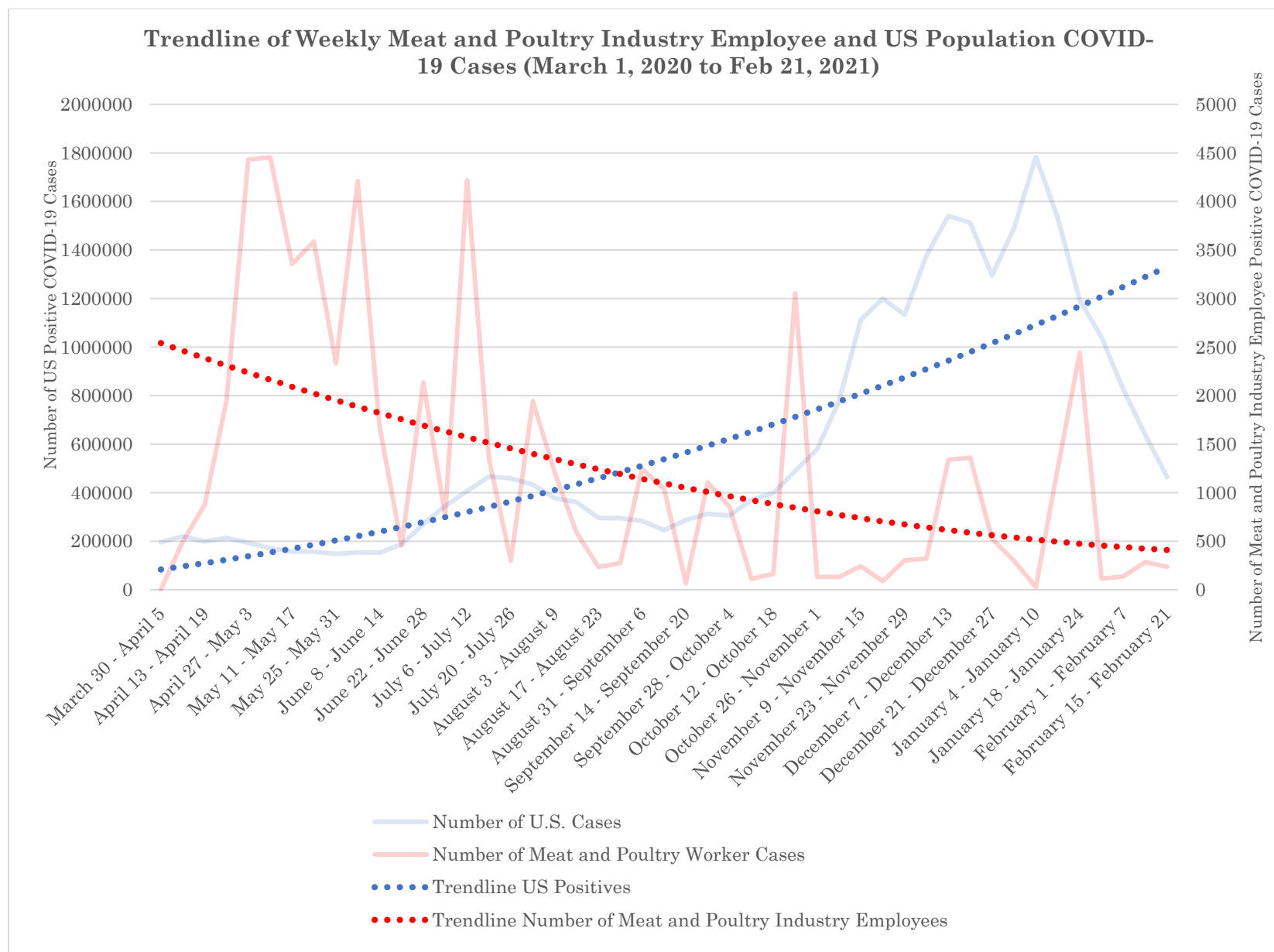
This is not a pandemic of the industry's making, but I have witnessed firsthand the investments the meat industry has made in working toward its elimination. The cost of protecting employees is high, and these mitigation strategies need to continue – likely into next year and even beyond as we re-evaluate what “normal” looks like. While the meat and poultry industry sustains its commitment to investing in employee safety, it's time for the federal government to show that same commitment to health and safety by ensuring immediate vaccinations for these essential frontline workers who show up every single day so we can eat.

**APPENDIX A**



Source: Food and Environment Reporting Network; last accessed February 21, 2021. And New York Times, last accessed February 21, 2021.

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