

# Outbreak at Iowa pork plant was larger than state reported

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The first confirmed coronavirus outbreak at an Iowa meatpacking plant was far more severe than previously known, with more than twice as many workers becoming infected than the state Department of Public

Health told the public, newly released records show.

The department announced at a May 5 news conference that 221 employees at the Tyson Foods pork processing plant in Columbus Junction had tested positive for COVID-19.

But days earlier, Tyson officials told Iowa workplace safety regulators during an inspection that 522 plant employees had been infected to their knowledge, documents obtained through the open records law show.

A dozen of the plant's roughly 1,300 workers were believed to have been hospitalized by then, and two died after contracting the virus, Tyson officials told the Iowa Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

The discrepancy adds to mounting questions that the state health department faces about its handling of public information during the pandemic. The department last week forced out its longtime spokeswoman, who said she was ousted for pushing hard to fulfill media requests and that the agency's delays and scripted talking points were embarrassing.

The agency has also faced criticism for seeking to actually had more than 1,000.

As for Columbus Junction, department spokeswoman Amy McCoy said the 221 case figure announced by Reisetter reflected the results of the department's testing and what it "could verify from our data systems" at the time.

"Keep in mind, we had just established an outbreak definition, and wanted to share the information we had available," she said. "Since that initial round of testing back in April, the testing reporting process has significantly improved."

The department never updated the number of confirmed infections in Columbus Junction. Unlike outbreaks at long-term care facilities, the department does not post workplace outbreaks on the state's coronavirus website.

At the May 5 briefing, Reisetter said that the 221 cases reflected 26 percent of those tested, which would be 850 total tests.

Tyson spokesman Gary Mickelson said the number of infections announced by the state appeared to reflect only the first round of testing at the plant and that additional testing had uncovered hundreds of more cases.

"Coordinating facility-wide testing and obtaining results is a complex process that takes time," he said.

But it's unclear why the department would not have the full testing results that Tyson described to Iowa OSHA. The department, along with county health officials, had conducted the mass testing of workers weeks earlier.

Tyson officials said they learned of the first case in Columbus Junction on April 1 and idled the plant four days later after 29 workers tested positive, according to an Iowa OSHA inspection report.

The governor sent 1,100 testing kits to the county for testing during the two-week shutdown. The plant reopened April 20 with new safety measures, and Mickelson said the company isn't aware of any current infections there.

Iowa OSHA opened an inquiry after seeing media reports that two workers had died from the virus and inspected the plant on April 30, walking through and meeting with several Tyson officials.

"There were 522 positive COVID-19 cases to the best of the company's knowledge," the inspection report says.

Tyson's plant manager told inspectors that communication between the company and public health officials was "not efficient" and that information about the positive cases wasn't available for days after testing, the report said.

Iowa OSHA did not cite Tyson for any workplace safety violations, saying the company "was trying to follow the best CDC guidance at the given time" and recommendations were rapidly changing.

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