

The Trump administration approved faster line speeds at chicken plants. Those facilities are more likely to have covid-19 cases.

By **Kimberly Kindy**, **Ted Mellnik** and **Arelis R. Hernández**

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The Trump administration allowed 15 poultry plants to increase slaughter line speeds during the pandemic, an action that boosts production and makes it more difficult for workers to maintain space between one another. It also appears to have hastened the spread of the [coronavirus](#).

Now the outgoing administration is rushing to finalize a rule that would make the faster line speeds permanent and expand them to dozens of other poultry plants — a move at odds with views held by President-elect Joe Biden.

“Whether it’s cattle, whether it’s beef, whether it’s pigs, whether it’s chicken, they’re moving down that line faster and faster and faster to increase the profit rate,” Biden said last year. “People are getting sicker. . . . People are getting hurt. The very thing we should be doing now is making sure these people are protected, that they have space six feet apart, that they have shields around them. Slow the process up.”

Since 2018, the Trump administration has issued — or reissued — temporary waivers that grant permission to 54 poultry plants to increase line speeds. These plants are allowed to speed up lines from 140 to 175 birds per minute, a 25 percent increase.

They are also 10 times as likely to have coronavirus cases than poultry plants without the line-speed waivers, according a Washington Post analysis of [data collected by the nonprofit Food and Environment Reporting Network \(FERN\)](#). The Post analysis mirrors academic research that shows more coronavirus cases in counties with plants that have waivers to raise line speeds.

Workers say the fast line speeds make it difficult, sometimes impossible, for them to socially distance during their eight-hour shifts as they struggle to work faster. Most of these plants are also large, employing thousands of workers who work in tight quarters, creating conditions that can fuel the spread of the virus.

Meat plants have been among the most virulent hot spots during the pandemic. More than 51,000 workers in beef, hog and poultry plants have become ill from the coronavirus, with at least 347 dying after becoming infected, [according to FERN data](#).

In response to questions from The Post, the USDA said a “direct link” between line speeds and the prevalence of coronavirus cases has not been established. The department also said it does not regulate worker safety and that, when determining line speeds, plants should follow guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

The National Chicken Council, an industry trade group, says there is no correlation among line-speed increases, problems with social distancing and coronavirus case rates.

Council spokesman Tom Super disputed plant employees' contention that faster slaughter lines have forced them to work faster to keep up with production. He said the plants with waivers have added additional processing lines and workers, which unions dispute. Super also discounted research that shows a connection between line speed and the spread of the coronavirus.

Super pointed out in a recent retweet of the National Chicken Council that the pandemic has been a boon for the poultry industry: "Americans flock to chicken, the nation's #1 quarantine protein," the council wrote, citing a survey that shows chicken sales have grown by 20 percent over the prior nine months.

During the spring and summer, the industry took out full-page advertisements in newspapers saying the meat supply chain was on the verge of breaking and plants needed to stay open, and gave a similar message to the White House.

At George's poultry plant in Springdale, Ark., which received a waiver in April to speed up lines, Juana Hernandez is one of more than 1,000 workers who help keep up with the growing demand. She said employees lunge over plastic dividers between work stations — intended to prevent the spread of the coronavirus — to snatch back chicken carcasses, so they can carve them into wings, drumsticks and breasts.

They bump elbows with co-workers through the plastic sheeting as they attempt to keep up with the quickened pace. The CDC says plastic "should not be used as a replacement for maintaining at least 6 feet between workers."

"We are inches from one another, knocking into each other through the plastic sheets," said Hernandez, 38, who has worked at the plant for five years and removes bones from the carcasses. "I eat lunch in my car to protect myself because the break room is too crowded. We are on top of one another as we clock in. It's scary. I worry about bringing it home."

An image taken from video shows workers pressed together, bodies touching one another as they clock in and out for their shifts.

At the Springdale plant 200 workers have been sick with the virus. George's did not respond to calls and emails

At the Springdale plant, 290 workers have been sick with the virus. George's did not respond to calls and emails requesting comment. The company website says it is the seventh-largest poultry producer in the nation and that "the well-being of our team members, customers, and consumers remains paramount."

It also cited more than a dozen measures it says it has taken since March, many disputed by workers in interviews with The Post.

Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.), who introduced a bill in July to block line-speed increases, said the Trump administration has failed to "adequately protect meatpacking plant workers and in fact, has shamefully made conditions worse by keeping plants [with high infection rates] open and allowing them to increase line speeds."

Booker said the last-minute push by the administration to permanently allow faster line speeds in poultry plants "is further evidence that they are willing to help corporate agribusiness prioritize profits over the health and safety of their workforce."

The Biden transition team declined to comment on the proposed rule. However, at a town hall meeting in May, Biden said he was opposed to speeding up slaughter lines.

"No worker's life is worth my getting a cheaper hamburger," he said, pounding the table in front of him. "No worker's life is worth that."

Coronavirus spread in plants

Slaughter line-speed increases began in the late 1990s as a USDA experiment in 20 chicken and four pork plants. The plan was to study and document whether food safety standards could be maintained — or improved — at the same time the pace inside the plants picked up. Plants were also allowed to replace some USDA inspectors on the slaughter line with employees of the meat company.

In 2012, during the Obama administration, the USDA proposed to make the experiment a permanent option for plants that slaughter young broiler chickens, if they developed new food safety controls.

There was immediate blowback. The USDA received about 100,000 comments that raised concerns about worker safety, and the proposed increase in line speeds was removed from the final rule.

"The argument that finally got attention in the White House and changed things was how this would have a disparate impact on vulnerable Black and Brown workers who make up a majority of the workers in this industry," said Debbie Berkowitz, who was chief of staff at OSHA and actively fought the line-speed provision.

More than 60 percent of meat plant workers are Black, Latino, Asian American or Native American, according to Labor Department data. About 37.5 percent are immigrants with limited or no English proficiency.

Illness rates for people who work in meatpacking plants — including carpal tunnel syndrome and tendinitis — are 16 times as high as the average for all other industries, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Although data shows illness rates in the plants have fallen, the Government Accountability Office in 2016 cited serious flaws with how the information is being collected and said it was not reliable.

The Trump administration began issuing waivers in 2018, ultimately giving dozens of chicken plants permission to run slaughter lines at 175 birds per minute — the exact rate the Obama administration rejected out of concern for workers.

Then the coronavirus spread through meat plants across the nation. An academic research paper that analyzed infection rates using data through mid-July found that counties with chicken plants that have waivers tended to have more coronavirus cases, on average, than those without waivers. The study was published in November in a top science journal, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

“A faster production line can result in both workers locating in greater proximity to one another and increased difficulty in maintaining personal protective equipment and thus could contribute to conditions that increase the likelihood of viral transmission,” the study said.

This aligns with the Post analysis, which looked at coronavirus cases in poultry plants through mid-December. Coronavirus cases have been reported at 41 percent of the plants with waivers, compared with an outbreak rate of less than 4 percent for other poultry plants, according to the Post analysis of FERN data.

The USDA questioned the validity of the conclusions drawn from the research. The department also said many plants slowed line speeds during the pandemic, causing it to further question a connection between slaughter speeds and coronavirus cases.

When meat plants became hot spots in late March and April, local health departments began to shut them down, ordering testing, personal protective gear and social distancing. But the industry petitioned the federal government for help to keep plant doors open, and Trump said plant employees were “essential workers.” He issued an executive order in April that said it was critical for beef, pork and poultry plants to “continue operating and fulfilling orders to ensure a continued supply of protein for Americans.”

With the backing of the White House — and direct intervention by federal officials with local and state governments — meat plants with active coronavirus cases were able to reopen and remain open.

'Ram this rule through'

Days after Trump lost his bid for reelection, the USDA sent a proposed regulation to allow all poultry plants to increase line speeds to the White House’s Office of Management and Budget, seeking its approval.

The odds of it being finalized before Biden’s inauguration appear slim, experts say, but past administrations have used methods to successfully push through such last-minute proposals, often referred to as midnight regulations.

“The fact that the agency sent this new proposed rule right after the election to the White House for clearance is a clear signal that they are trying to ram this rule through before the new administration can shut it down,” said Berkowitz, the former OSHA official who is now the worker safety director at the nonprofit National Employment Law Project. If the White House clears the proposal, the USDA pledged to have a period of public comment.

Biden’s transition team said last week that he would block actions taken by the Trump administration that had not yet become official. Even if the Biden administration doesn’t support a new rule to permanently increase line speeds, it’s unclear what will become of the 54 plants with waivers. Past administrations, including Obama’s, have routinely let

them stand.

Employees at poultry plants, like the one where Juana Hernandez works, are concerned that the fast speeds and the tight quarters where they work will look the same as they did during the Trump administration.

Although Super, with the National Chicken Council, said faster slaughter lines “do not translate into faster cutup and debone lines,” a colleague of Hernandez said he can no longer “get a good grip” on the chicken since line speeds increased in the fall.

The 38-year-old, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he fears retribution from management, said he used to process 36 to 38 chickens per minute but now must process 43 to 45 birds per minute. He is one of the employees knocking elbows with workers through plastic sheeting as he cuts wings off chicken carcasses.

In an interview in Spanish, the worker said he comes into the plant 30 minutes before the beginning of his 7 a.m. shift, hoping to avoid people in the crowd who may carry the coronavirus, which made his mother sick in July. She quit the plant this summer, he said, and never came back.

The quickened pace of his work means he comes home with more aches and pains than before. He recently went to the plant’s nursing station for a pain in his shoulder but was disappointed when the nurse, who was not present at the time he arrived, had to be called in and gave him 180 milligrams of ibuprofen. There was no massage, no review of his pain and no referral to a doctor. He has stopped going to the nurse and relies on vitamins from the local Salvadoran market to help.

“It’s inhumane,” he said. “We are worse than machines. At least machines get maintenance every so often. We don’t get anything.”

Julie Tate contributed to this report.

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