

Exports Continue to Be A Bright Spot for U.S. Pork Sector

By James Mintert

Exports of U.S. pork to all destinations in 2021 declined modestly (3%) when compared to 2020, but export volume in 2021 was still the second largest on record. U.S. pork production declined 2% in 2021 to 27.7 billion pounds so pork exports, at just over 7 billion pounds, equated to 25% of U.S. pork production. Net pork exports, which account for the quantity of pork imported into the U.S., were the equivalent of 21% of U.S. pork production, somewhat lower than the 22% net export figure for 2020.

Although net exports fell below the prior year in 2021, the long-term transition of the U.S. pork sector into an export-oriented industry continues unabated. Twenty years ago, net exports of pork from the U.S. totaled just 3% of U.S. production. This stands in contrast with the last decade when net pork exports consistently exceeded 15% of U.S. production, breaking through the 20% barrier for the first time in 2020. When the pounds of pork exported are compared over time the result is even more astounding. In 2001 net pork exports from the U.S. were just a little over 600 million pounds. In 2020 net exports were more than 10 times that large, reaching 6.4 billion pounds before falling back to 5.9 billion pounds in 2021.

Who the U.S. exports pork to continues to shift over time. Exports to China, the world's largest pork producer, fluctuate the most from one year to the next as production levels and economic conditions in China ebb and flow. As recently as 2017 and 2018, pork exports to China represented less than 10% of all U.S. pork exports. With African Swine Fever (ASF) devastating China's pork sector in 2019 and 2020, imports of pork from the U.S. into China surged with China (mainland China and Hong Kong, combined) taking 17% and 29% of all U.S. pork exports in 2019 and 2020, respectively. China remained an important U.S. pork consumer in 2021 but did drop back to absorbing just 17% of U.S. pork exports as China's domestic pork production rebounded. The biggest U.S. pork customer in 2021 was Mexico with shipments totaling 29% of all U.S. pork exports, up from 22% the year before.

The top 5 customers for U.S. pork in 2021 were 1) Mexico, 2) Japan, 3) China, 4) Canada and 5) South Korea. Looking ahead to the rest of 2022, it looks like U.S. export prospects will depend on economic strength in importing countries as well as what takes place concerning disease-related production disruptions. Long-term, the U.S. pork sector continues to be well-positioned to be a dominant pork exporter.