



GRAIN  
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# Remembering La Gloria

## New television documentary traces origins of the H1N1 pandemic back to pig farms in Mexico

*This past November people from all over Mexico gathered in the Valley of Perote, where the village of La Gloria is located, for the fifth Asamblea Nacional de Afectados Ambientales [National Assembly of Environmentally Affected]. It is a large, periodical gathering of a network of communities and organisations struggling against environmental devastation in Mexico. The location for this most recent gathering was chosen in recognition of the importance of the local struggles against the large pig farms in the area, which had gained national and worldwide attention when the first human cases of pandemic H1N1 swine flu were traced back to La Gloria in April 2009. This was the second Asamblea for the people of La Gloria and the first for an alliance of communities in the Valley of Perote who have now joined La Gloria in resisting factory farming. Out of the swine flu crisis, the struggle against factory farming has grown stronger, moving from isolated local resistance to a major component of a national movement. A new documentary on the H1N1 pandemic and factory farming, based on the experiences of La Gloria and the neighbouring communities, now brings this struggle to an international audience and puts factory farming back on centre stage in the story of the H1N1 pandemic.*

In April last year, the international media descended on the village of La Gloria and the surrounding Valley of Perote, in the state of Veracruz, Mexico. The village had been identified as the ground zero of the H1N1 swine flu pandemic and reporters came looking for answers as to why the disease may have broken out there. What they found was disturbing. The villagers told them that they had been suffering from severe respiratory illnesses for months but had been ignored by the authorities. What's more, they explained how the whole valley was engaged in a struggle against numerous factory pig farms that had invaded their territory in recent years. For the villagers, the farms were clearly the source of their health problems.

The story of these once isolated struggles was thus broadcast around the world and the shocking images of pollution and destruction from the factory farms shattered the myth of "biosecurity" that the multinational meat industry claims of its operations. Suddenly it was plain for all to see that what these communities were fighting against was intimately connected to the health of the whole planet.

But the reaction from the meat industry and its friends in government was equally swift. As implausible as it was, they denied any connection between the H1N1 outbreak in humans and the pig industry. Independent investigations were blocked or not carried out. And as the WHO bowed to pressure and officially stopped referring to the disease as “swine flu”, the international media stopped following the trail. The result is that, today, across the world, the big meat corporations continue exactly as they did before-- without even any obligation to report or monitor for pandemic H1N1 or other swine flu viruses in their operations (see Box). The Mexican government has even backed down from its promise to force the farms next to La Gloria, owned by US-based Smithfield Foods, to adhere to Mexico’s minimal environmental regulations-- which they were clearly violating.<sup>1</sup>

A new television documentary by Télévision Suisse Romande (TSR), however, should reignite this international scandal. It returns to Mexico, and the Valley of Perote, to continue the investigation into how and why the H1N1 pandemic began. By way of interviews with villagers, government officials, doctors and scientists, the documentary establishes a clear link between the on-going health problems in La Gloria and other nearby communities and the operations of the factory farms that have moved to the region since the signing of North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994. It also exposes the collusion of the Mexican government with the industry and shows how nothing has been done to protect the affected communities. With shocking on-site footage, the documentary provides clear evidence of the profound damage that the farms have wreaked on these communities, and it puts the role of factory farms squarely back into the centre of the story of the H1N1 pandemic, where it belongs.

The TSR documentary is now available in French (original version) and English on the GRAIN website and will soon be available in Spanish (see below). We hope that this investigative report will be widely distributed. The next pandemic will likely emerge from a factory farm somewhere, and it will likely first strike a community very much like La Gloria. The world needs to learn from this experience and take action. The TSR documentary provides a critical insight into just what needs to be done.

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### **Box: Update on pandemic H1N1 and pigs**

There is mounting scientific evidence that the pandemic H1N1 virus emerged from pigs, and most likely within the factory farms of North America where conditions are ideal for the evolution of such viruses.<sup>2</sup> A study published in June 2009 in *Nature* found that “the ancestors of the epidemic [pandemic] have been circulating undetected [in pigs] for about a decade” and that the actual pandemic strain “may have been circulating in pigs for several years before emergence in humans.” They conclude that “the lack of systematic swine surveillance allowed for the undetected persistence and evolution of this potentially pandemic strain for many years.”<sup>3</sup>

Since the outbreak of pandemic H1N1, authorities in most countries have done little to enhance surveillance of pig farms. The common practice is to leave it to the companies to monitor, with no obligations to report the disease if they find it. The reports of outbreaks that have emerged, therefore,

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1 To the contrary, according to Silvia Ribeiro of the ETC Group, the Mexican Government has granted Clean Development Mechanism status (under the Climate Change Convention) to a project undertaken by Smithfield’s subsidiary, Granjas Carroll, to capture methane from the immense excrement lagoons at its factory farms. Silvia Ribeiro, “Cerdos Climáticos”, *La Jornada*, October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009; Pronunciamento de las comunidades del Valle de Perote en la 5 Asamblea de Afectados Ambientales, 8 de noviembre, 2009.

2 Charles W. Schmidt, “Swine CAFOs and Novel H1N1 Flu: Separating Facts from Fears,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* Volume 117, Number 9, September 2009: <http://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/members/2009/117-9/focus.html>

3 Gavin J. D. Smith, Dhanasekaran Vijaykrishna1, Justin Bahl, Samantha J. Lycett, Michael Worobey, Oliver G. Pybus, Siu Kit Ma1, Chung Lam Cheung1, Jayna Raghvani, Samir Bhatt, J. S. Malik Peiris, Yi Guan & Andrew Rambaut, “Origins and evolutionary genomics of the 2009 swine-origin H1N1 influenza A epidemicnear-final version”, *Nature* 459, 1122-1125, 25 June 2009.

likely only represent a fraction of the actual number.<sup>4</sup> But they are nonetheless enough to indicate that pandemic H1N1 is widespread in so-called “closed” pig farms (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Known outbreaks of pandemic H1N1 in pigs (up to 5 January 2010)**

Country	Outbreak reported	Number of outbreaks	Species	Origin of infection / info
Mexico	1-May-09	1	pig	Unknown
Canada	2-May-09	1	pig	Reported as likely introduced by a worker, but worker later tested negative for H1N1.
Argentina	25-Jun-09	2	pig	Two workers test positive for H1N1
Australia	31-Jul-09	1	pig	Tests on 2 workers show infection with H1N1
Canada	31-Jul-09	1	pig	Unknown
Australia	18-Aug-09	1	pig	Unknown
Canada	24-Aug-09	several	pig	Unknown
Australia	25-Aug-09	1	pig	Unknown
USA	1-Sep-09	1	pig	6 out of 102 pigs tested at 2 state fairs test positive..
United Kingdom	18-Sep-09	3	pig	One worker had “flu-like” symptoms at one farm, but no signs of illness in workers at other farms.
Ireland	29-Sep-09	2	pig	Believed to have been transmitted by an infected worker
Norway	12-Oct-09	37	pig	In several cases virus is believed to have been introduced by infected workers.
Australia	14-Oct-09	1	pig	Unknown
Japan	21-Oct-09	1	pig	Unknown
Iceland	27-Oct-09	2	pig	Inconclusive
USA	3-Nov-09	1	pig	Unknown
Taiwan	5-Nov-09	1	pig	Unknown
China (Hong Kong)	5-Nov-09	1	pig	Virus found in samples from slaughterhouse
China	19-Nov-09	-	pig	Virus found in pigs at a slaughterhouse in Heilongjiang
Indonesia	26-Nov-09	1	pig	Unknown. Outbreak occurred at farm operation on Bulan Island containing 270,000 pigs owned by the Salim Group.
Italy	27-Nov-09	1	pig	Unknown
United Kingdom	2-Dec-09	1	pig	Inconclusive
Germany	3-Dec-09	1	pig	Unknown
China	10-Dec-09	1	pig	Owner and workers show no signs of the flu.
Thailand	18-Dec-09	1	pig	Unknown. Tests of workers and local people revealed no evidence of H1N1
South Korea	29-Dec-09	16	pig	Inconclusive. 1st outbreak reported on Dec. 14
USA	29-Dec-09	2	pig	Inconclusive
Russia	31-Dec-09	1	pig	Inconclusive. Farm has 10,000 pigs.

Source: OIE and various media reports.

In Mexico, the response of the authorities, when the H1N1 broke out in humans, was to deny that there was any problem with the disease in the pig industry. On May 14, 2009, during a pork dinner

<sup>4</sup> Norway has probably pursued the most extensive testing of pig farms. In the pig farming district of Nord-Trøndelag County, between October 10-26, 2009, a total of 39 farms were tested and 18 of these were found positive for pandemic influenza: <http://www.eurosurveillance.org/ViewArticle.aspx?ArticleId=19406>

organised to defend the pork industry, Mexico's Minister of Agriculture, Alberto Cárdenas, told the media: *"Until now there has not been a single outbreak of swine flu."*

This was not true. Two weeks prior, on May 1, an outbreak of the pandemic H1N1 was identified in pigs at a farm in Queretaro. That outbreak was only made public when it was finally reported to the World Animal Health Organisation (OIE) in December, seven months after the fact.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is known that swine flu is rampant in Mexico's pig farms.<sup>6</sup> It was first identified in the country in 1982, and as the industry has become more industrialised and more integrated with the US and the global meat industry, where swine flu is endemic, problems have escalated. But the government enforces no controls over the disease and there is practically zero monitoring-- everything is left to the companies to handle. Today pig farms in Mexico are still under no obligation to report o

*Alberto Cardenas eating pork with FAO representative Norman Bellino, May 14th, 2009. (Photo: EFE)<sup>4</sup>*



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Télévision Suisse Romande, "H1N1: Why did it strike the Mexicans first?", September 2009

French version: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbr361fXxPQ>

English version: <http://blip.tv/file/3062019>

Spanish version: (not yet available)

### **Going Further:**

GRAIN, "A food system that kills: Swine flu is meat industry's latest plague," April 2009:

<http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=48>

Laura Carlsen, "The Great Swine Flu Cover-Up," 10 September 2009: <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/6408>

Beyond Factory Farming Fact Sheet #6 - Swine Flu: Evolution of a pandemic: from factory farm to hospital ward - July 2009: <http://beyondfactoryfarming.org/files/swineflu.pdf>

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<sup>5</sup> The outbreak began on April 30th and was confirmed by PCR test on May 1st. See report to OIE: [http://www.oie.int/wahis/public.php?page=single\\_report&pop=1&reportid=8741](http://www.oie.int/wahis/public.php?page=single_report&pop=1&reportid=8741)

<sup>6</sup> The only thorough study of swine flu in pigs in Mexico was carried out in the state of Yucatan by university scientists in 2004. In their study of 25 factory farms they found that swine flu had been circulating in over half of the farms and they warned that, since both the H1N1 and H3N2 viruses were present, there was potential for recombination to form new strains. Scientists now believe that this sort of recombination led to the pandemic H1N1 virus. Mario Alvarez Fleites, Jorge C. Rodriguez Buenfil, Abel Ciprian Carrasco, Lourdes Rodriguez Guzman, Guadalupe Ayora Tavera, José C. Segura Correa, "Serological profile of porcine influenza virus, Mycoplasma hypneumoniae and Actinobacillus pleuropneumoniae, in farms of Yucatan, Mexico," *Vet. Mex.*, 35 (4) 2004: <http://www.ejournal.un-am.mx/rvm/vol35-04/RVM35402.pdf>; Gavin J. D. Smith, Dhanasekaran Vijaykrishna 1, Justin Bahl, Samantha J. Lycett, Michael Worobey, Oliver G. Pybus, Siu Kit Ma 1, Chung Lam Cheung 1, Jayna Raghvani, Samir Bhatt, J. S. Malik Peiris, Yi Guan & Andrew Rambaut, "Origins and evolutionary genomics of the 2009 swine-origin H1N1 influenza A epidemic near-final version", *Nature* 459, 1122-1125, 25 June 2009.

<sup>7</sup> "Urgen control de influenza en animales," *El Universal*, 28 November 2009.