

GEOGRAPHICAL RECORD

PIGS ON THE PRAIRIES*

MICHAEL J. BROADWAY

In 1897 the Canadian government established the “Crow Rate” to subsidize the cost of transporting grain from the prairies to Canadian ports. It remained in effect until 1995; since then, farmers have borne the full cost of transporting their grain shipments, with the result that the region is now awash in inexpensive grain. Provincial governments have promoted the hog industry to consume the grain by easing local planning restrictions for the construction of hog barns, allowing contracting between processors and producers, and promoting the expansion of hog-slaughter facilities. Manitoba Province has experienced the largest increase in hog numbers, with most of its growth confined to a small area southeast of Winnipeg, the provincial capital. Concentrating large quantities of hog waste within a small area creates potential ground- and surface-water contamination problems and has aroused strong opposition in some areas. The majority of the region’s hog production is exported, with the United States being the largest recipient of live hogs and pork.

A late-summer’s drive across Canada’s prairies does little to alter the popular image of golden fields of wheat. And although many wooden grain elevators have been replaced by fewer and larger concrete “inland terminals,” mile-long trains hauling hopper cars full of grain remind the casual observer of the continued importance of the region as an exporter. But beyond this superficial appearance prairie agriculture is being transformed; in scattered areas across the region large metal sheds and waste lagoons have been constructed to house a burgeoning hog industry (Figure 1).

The industry’s most rapid expansion has occurred in Manitoba. Between 1995 and 2005 the number of hogs produced in the province increased by more than 5.1 million, or 182 percent (Table I). Similar, albeit smaller, increases occurred during the same period in Saskatchewan (98 percent) and Alberta (38 percent) Provinces, while the prairie region’s share of Canadian hog slaughter increased from 32 percent to 37 percent, with most pork being exported to the United States.

The transition from a grain-dependent export economy to a livestock–processed meat export economy has been attributed in part to the 1995 elimination of the

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✪ DR. BROADWAY is a professor of geography at Northern Michigan University, Marquette, Michigan 49855.