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Pork Lobby Bristles at Swine Flu Label

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By SCOTT KILMAN and LAUREN ETTER

Agricultural groups, worried that the swine flu outbreak is scaring consumers away from eating pork, are successfully prodding the federal government to refer to the virus by its scientific name: H1N1.

The Agriculture Department, which used the term "swine influenza" as recently as Monday, clung to the anonymous term "H1N1 flu" in a statement Tuesday touting the safeness of U.S. pork.

In a briefing Tuesday, Richard Besser, acting director of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, acknowledged that the agency's use of the swine flu label was fueling the misconception that people could catch the new respiratory disease from food. "That's not helpful to pork producers. That's not helpful to people who eat pork," Dr. Besser said.

Still, many scientists say the CDC is well within its rights to describe the disease as swine flu even though it seems to have mutated into a unique human virus. Flu viruses tend to be named after the first species in which they are discovered, and H1N1 was discovered in pigs decades ago.

Genetic sequencing of the new form of the H1N1 virus shows that it clearly had a long history in hogs before it made the leap into the human population and acquired its deadly new traits.

"The vast amount of material in it is in pigs," said Michael T. Osterholm, director of the University of Minnesota's Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy.

Since the flu outbreak made headlines last week, the National Pork Producers Council has pestered health officials to stop calling it swine flu. "The whole industry is talking to the USDA and the White House," an industry lobbyist said.

Smithfield Foods Inc., the biggest U.S. pork concern, prefers to call the disease "North American influenza." Swine flu "just has the wrong name," said C. Larry Pope, Smithfield chief executive officer.

Whether the rebranding effort works is far from clear. U.S. hog prices have slumped for two days in a row in large part because countries such as Russia and China are moving to restrict their imports of U.S. pork until the situation becomes clearer.

It isn't the first time farmers have complained about putting the swine label on a human flu. When an outbreak of swine flu in 1976 among soldiers in Fort Dix, N.J., ignited alarm, an industry group unsuccessfully pleaded for the name to be changed to "New Jersey flu."

—Betsy McKay contributed to this article.

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