

**BY JOSH FUNK**

AP Business Writer

Ham prices have been higher than usual for the past two years because the cost of hog feed has gone up, and some major pork producers are spending millions to convert barns as they phase out cramped cages used to confine pregnant sows.

A recent check at one Omaha-area supermarket found boneless Hormel hams selling for about \$2.20 per pound, with bone-in hams slightly cheaper. With sales offered this week to attract Easter shoppers, it was possible to get a bone-in ham for as little as \$1.28 per pound.

Paula Vejvoda of Omaha said she's had her Easter ham in the

"You really have to watch the ads and see who has the best price," Vejvoda said.

That's good advice for families, but hard to do when you're trying to provide ham for hundreds of people at a food pantry.

Joyce Lonergan, food pantry director at St. Anthony's Shrine in downtown Boston, said she tries to arrange to have a special meal at each holiday to help boost people's spirits, but the prospect seemed

With added donations and some breaks from suppliers, St. Anthony's was able to secure ham steaks and chickens for the holiday meal.

"We've made it work only because people have been so generous," Lonergan said.

Livestock economist Shane Ellis said the price of ham isn't likely to drop soon because pork producers' costs aren't decreasing. Feed, which is mainly corn, is running about \$6 a bushel — not far from the record

Pork producers also are switching from gestation crates to more open pens amid public pressure from consumers and animal welfare advocates who believe the smaller cages are cruel. One major producer, Smithfield Foods, recently said it expects to spend nearly \$300 million by 2017 to convert its barns.

The switch also requires more labor to manage the sows because they tend to fight. Some of those costs are likely to be passed on to consumers.

Americans consume about 51 pounds of pork a year on average, according to the U.S. Department

While ham is a traditional element of many Easter meals, Ellis said prices typically peak in June, near the height of the grilling season when demand is highest. The low point is usually at the end of the calendar year because that's when large numbers of hogs reach the market.

Many organizations, like the Food Bank for the Heartland, don't even attempt to deliver a special holiday meal to the people they help because their goal is to offer the most nutritious food at the lowest possible price.

Donations from business and in-

dividuals have been down over the past two years, making it harder to keep up with the need in the 93 counties in eastern Nebraska and western Iowa that the food bank serves, spokesman Brian Barks said.

Most food pantries, shelters and other programs receiving food from the Omaha food bank this Easter will receive staples like pasta, peanut butter or canned chicken. The food bank recently received 4,200 3-pound hams from the USDA, but Barks said those were gone within a couple of weeks.

"Meat has almost become a luxury item at the food bank," he said.



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