What seems like a harmless activity to help the planet can sometimes carry considerable risks.

Feeding table scraps to your pigs may seem like a harmless activity that saves the planet. However, in practice, feeding table scraps can carry considerable risk. Due to the risks, there are laws that dictate who can, and cannot, feed table scraps or human food waste to pigs.

Under PA and Federal laws, human food waste is classified by its contents. When food waste contains or has come into contact with animal tissue products, then that food waste is defined as 'garbage'. Feeding of garbage, by definition of the law, carries significant risks.

So, what exactly is this risk? Predominantly, a risk of spoilage or spreading disease. Both of which will harm the health for your pigs.

To discuss these risks, we should first take a step back to understand what goes into producing safe food from animals.

Before entering the human food chain, all animal tissues (ie, milk, meat, poultry, eggs, fish) processed for human consumption in the U.S. must be cleared of all signs of illness. This clearance is obtained through USDA animal health and food safety inspections. All packaging and food preparation facilities (restaurants, cafeterias, etc.) are also subject to inspections in order to prepare food for human consumption. Feed mills and manufacturers that provide feed to livestock must also go through similar inspections and auditing to ensure that the feed they produce is safe for livestock to eat.

That’s a lot of hoops for a ham to jump through to make sure it is safe for humans to eat! But after you open that package of deli meat at home, that product is at risk of spoilage. Spoilage can make your pigs very sick and slow growth. Spoilage often results in intestinal infections that require antibiotics to treat. That is extra money spent on your pigs to get them healthy again and extra time to wait for the antibiotics to clear your pig’s system (withdrawal time) before selling that pig or eating it yourself.

In addition to spoilage, pigs fed uncooked or undercooked pork products, including cured hams and frozen products, may be at risk of catching viral infections such as African Swine Fever or Classical Swine Fever. Many Americans travel frequently. Anyone that brings pork from overseas may be carrying a virus that won’t make people sick but could very well harm pigs that come into contact with infected meat.

Adding to the challenge, African Swine Fever and Classical Swine Fever are diseases that travel slowly through a herd. Animals that are sick with either of these viruses might not show symptoms right away. If you transport these animals, they can then spread it to many other animals. This is potentially devastating to your pig business as well as your neighbors, and the long-term value of pork in the U.S.

Risks that are carried with feeding of garbage waste are not limited to disease; there are also risks that are carried with feeding an inconsistent product to livestock, particularly pigs.

Pigs benefit from access to diets that provide them with a complete nutrient profile in every bite. When new ingredients are introduced, you need to reformulate your diet to ensure your diet offers all the nutrients your pigs need. Garbage feeding can result in constant changes to your pigs’ diet. This means that it is incredibly difficult to be sure your pigs are getting the right nutrients every time you feed them. In the best-case scenario, your pigs will be overfed some nutrients, and produce excess manure as they pass unnecessary fiber and excess nutrients. Leaving you to deal with the manure overload and possibly place more strain on your nutrient management plan.

However, in the worst-case scenario, you will underfeed your pigs for essential nutrients. This will reduce the growth and health of your pig over time. Leaving you with a poorer quality animal that may not reproduce, not grow efficiently, or produce a poor-quality pork product.
Feeding of garbage waste for pigs is complicated, to put it lightly. In the state of Pennsylvania, if you choose to feed pigs food waste products that do not originate from a household on the same premises that the pigs reside, then you require a license. Producers should be hyperaware of the decisions they make regarding ingredients in their feedstuffs for pigs. If you wish to feed table scraps, or garbage, to pigs, you need to know and follow the laws to keep your pigs, and the pork you produce, healthy and safe.

Full laws on garbage feeding in PA can be found in AGRICULTURE CODE (3 PA.C.S.); federal laws on garbage feeding can be found under the Swine Health Protection Act. Contact your Penn State Extension for more information on how to feed your pigs safely and effectively.

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