



Factory Farms

The True Costs

Despite overwhelming scientific evidence presented during the past two decades demonstrating a relationship between meat consumption and disease, the amount of animal flesh consumed in the U.S. has not dropped. In fact, it has increased slightly. The per capita consumption of mammal and bird flesh rose from 196 lbs. in 1980 to 213 lbs.

Americans continue to eat large amounts of animal flesh — far more than what could be considered necessary for nutritional purposes — because it is aggressively marketed to seem desirable and essential, it is readily accessible and convenient, and because it is relatively cheap.

The take-over of agriculture in the U.S. by large corporations has allowed a larger number of animals to be produced more quickly and for less money. Agribusiness has reaped great profits while keeping consumer prices low. But the real costs of factory farming — in terms of the loss of family farms, food-borne illness, damage to the environment, and animal suffering — have been tremendous.



Loss of Family Farms

Family farms are being squeezed out of business by their inability to raise the capital to compete with huge factory farms. Traditional farming is labor intensive, but factory farming is capital intensive. Farmers who do manage to raise the money for animal confinement systems quickly discover that the small savings in labor costs are not enough to cover the increasing costs of facilities, energy, caging, and drugs.

The increase in factory farms has led to a decrease in the price independent farmers get for their animals, forcing thousands out of business. The number of U.S. farmers dropped by 300,000 between 1979 and 1998.

During a recent 15-year period, hog farms in the U.S. decreased from 600,000 to 157,000, while the number of hogs sold increased. Consolidation has resulted in just 3 percent of U.S. hog farms producing more than 50 percent of the hogs. Similarly, 2 percent of cattle feed operations account for more than 40 percent of the nation's cattle. In the poultry industry, the number of "broiler" chicken farms declined by 35 percent between 1969 and 1992, while the number of birds raised and slaughtered increased nearly three-fold.



The demise of small farms in the U.S. has been helped along by actions of the federal government. Congress, influenced by strong lobbying groups, has consistently passed federal farm programs benefiting the large agricultural corporations. According to the Center for Public Integrity, between 1987 and 1996, the food industry made campaign contributions of more than \$41 million to federal lawmakers.

The bias against small farms continues despite the appointment of a special commission in the late 1990s by then-Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman to study how small farms have been displaced by factory farms and how the trend might be reversed. The report from that commission, titled "A Time to Act," described the enormous social costs of the destruction of the American family farm, as the economic basis of rural communities in the U.S. diminishes and rural towns are "lost."



Animal Suffering

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service, each year about 10 percent — or 900 million — of the animals raised for food never reach the slaughterhouse. They die on the farm due to stress, injury, and disease. The on-farm death rate ranges from a low of 4 percent for cows and calves to 12 percent for turkeys, 14 percent for hogs, and 28 percent for some types of chickens.

Agribusiness corporations claim that animals in factory farms are "as well cared for as their own pet dog or cat." Nothing could be further from the truth. The life of an animal in a factory farm is characterized by acute deprivation, stress, and disease. Industrialized agriculture has made the determination that it is more "cost effective" to accept some loss in inventory than to spend money on treating animals humanely.

Farm animals, by the millions, are forced to live in cages or crates just barely larger than their own bodies. While some species, like hogs and veal calves, may be caged alone without any social contact, others, like egg-laying hens and chickens, may be crowded so tightly together that they fall prey to stress-induced cannibalism. Unable to groom, stretch their legs, or even turn around, the victims of factory farms exist in a constant state of distress.



If a private citizen confined a dog or cat in a manner common in factory farms, or subjected an animal to surgical procedures without anesthesia, the individual could be charged with cruelty to animals. Farming is an area, however, that federal and state laws protecting animals barely touch. The powerful agribusiness and pharmaceutical lobbies have seen to it that farm animals are specifically excluded from welfare laws.

There are virtually no federal laws that protect farm animals from even the most harsh and brutal treatment as long as it takes place in the name of production and profit. The federal Animal Welfare Act, which regulates the treatment of animals for commercial purposes, does not apply to farm animals unless they are being used in research or for exhibition. Moreover, a majority of states have specifically exempted some aspect of the treatment of animals in agriculture from their cruelty laws.* It is left entirely to the preference of the individual company how many egg-laying hens are stuffed into each little wire cage, or whether an artificially inseminated sow must spend her entire pregnancy chained to the floor of a cement-bottomed cage.



Making People Sick

Factory farm conditions result in severe physiological as well as behavioral afflictions in animals. Anemia, influenza, intestinal diseases, mastitis, metritis, orthostasis, pneumonia, and scours are only the beginning of a long list of ailments plaguing animals in factory farms. By ignoring basic needs such as exercise, fresh air, wholesome food, and proper veterinary care, factory farms are a breeding ground for stress and infectious disease.

It is all done in the name of increasing profits. Animals in factory farms are confined in cages and crates to save on space and limit the number of workers required. The animals are given antibiotics, hormones, and highly concentrated feed to accelerate growth and weight gain.



Factory farms attempt to counter the ill effects of this intensive confinement by administering continuous doses of antibiotics and other drugs to the animals. This "cost effective" practice has a significant negative impact on both the animals and the people who consume them. Veterinarians and animal protection advocates have long expressed concern over the conditions on factory farms, and now medical doctors are warning that the tragedy of factory farming reaches well beyond the farm animals themselves... Widespread overuse of antibiotics is resulting in the evolution of new strains of virulent bacteria whose resistance to antibiotics poses a great threat to human health. Doctors are now reporting that, due to their uncontrolled use on factory farms, these formerly life-saving drugs are often rendered useless in combating human disease.

Conditions on factory farms and in slaughterhouses are also responsible for a large proportion of food-borne illnesses reported in the U.S. each year. Officials at the USDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have referred to the current situation with food-related disease as an "epidemic."

***States that exempt some aspect of agriculture from animal anti-cruelty statute: Alaska, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wyoming.**

The article above is reprinted with the permission of the Humane Farming Association (HFA).

