

The Factory Farm: A House of Horrors

“At night ... all I'd hear as I was trying to fall asleep was the sound of the pigs fighting each other, biting each other, squealing, screeching all night long. It was like nothing I've ever heard before .... like kids being tortured .... I'll never forget that sound. It was very sad.” (Suddath) Such is the life of an animal on a factory farm. Locked in cages, they never see the sun, play outside, or run around. They can barely move. Medicine is served with every meal, weakening their immune systems. They are stuck with needles daily to fatten them, as they sit in darkness and horror waiting to be killed.

Large U.S. farm interests say that nothing can be done, that we have to treat animals with “efficient” cruelty to produce enough food for humans at a reasonable cost. Those farmers are maximizing their profits from food production while ruining the environment for the rest of us. By changing our laws and our buying and eating habits, to support smaller farms and socially responsible companies, we can stop the needless torture of animals and destruction of the environment.

Factory farms, or CAFOs, are Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations with 1,000 or more animals. They use large buildings instead of green pastures, have food shipped in, and have no ground to absorb waste. (Suddah) Pasture farms rely on large pastures and smaller buildings, grow their food, e.g., grass, in the pasture, and give their animals exercise and sunshine every day. The biggest difference between factory farms and pasture farms is that on factory farms, animals are raised indoors, in overcrowded conditions, while on pasture farms, animals enjoy happier, more natural lives.

Over nine billion chickens are killed for food in the U.S. every year. Chickens are killed at extremely young ages. Workers called “catchers” catch chickens and bring them

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to the slaughterhouse. Chickens are provided no food, water, or shelter on the way to the slaughterhouse, so many die on the trip. To make killing them easier, factory farm workers put chickens in leg shackles while still alive, hang them upside down on a moving rail, where they are shocked in an electric bath and their throats are cut by a hot high-speed blade, and then are plunged into a boiling tub. Sometimes the shock in the electric bath is too low, reviving many chickens, which then suffer the high-speed blade. The blade also misses many chickens, which are, consequently, boiled alive. Male chicks are not useful to the egg or meat industry, so they are gassed, thrown into trash cans, or ground up in groups while still alive. Dead chickens are usually left in with live ones. (mspca angell - Chickens)

Groups of chickens are stuffed into cages with less room per bird than a standard sheet of paper, spreading disease and making them go berserk and peck at each other. To prevent this, chicks are de-beaked without painkillers. Without beaks, they cannot make nests, causing them great stress. (mspca angell - Chickens) (Grace)

Factory farms also starve their chickens to force the molting that makes them lay more eggs. (mspca angell - Chickens) Chickens fed unnatural and hurtful diets produce unhealthy eggs. The factory farm industry claims that it does not give illegal growth hormones to chicken and pork, but factory farmers feed their chickens beef containing hormones, pork, other chickens, and antibiotics, which imitate hormones, that make them so fat they can barely move. (Grace)

Because pigs in factory farms do not have room for calorie-burning activities, they also get fat. Like the de-beaked chickens, pigs gone berserk from confinement bite each other's tails; so factory farmers cut them off without anesthetic. As with chickens,

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waste pits cause serious health problems for pigs, as do the metal or concrete floors, which are supposed to be 100% soft soil or bedding. As of 2001, 75% of hogs in the U.S. were produced on large-scale CAFOs. (Schaffer)

Like chickens, cows also have their babies taken from them at birth and fed unnatural and hurtful diets. (AWI – humane practices) To make them fatter, factory farmers feed their cows grain, corn and soybean instead of grass, and antibiotics. Veal calves are purposefully undernourished, to make their meat tender. Straw is not allowed in veal calf crates, to deprive them of iron. (mspca angell – Cows)

Cows live a life of horror and abuse from birth to death. Separated from their babies a few hours after birth, dairy cows become so stressed that they must be given tranquilizers to calm their unexercised muscles and nervous systems. Veal calves spend their entire lives in wooden crates, until they are killed at only 14 to 16 weeks old. (mspca angel – Cows)

The suffering of animals on factory farms has consequences for the environment and people, including lost jobs, disease and death. (Suddah) (Ikerd) With no ground to absorb waste naturally, spills and leaks from waste lagoons poison water and fish, affecting both health and the fish industry. Manure flowing into Iowa's streams and ponds from 450 factory farm spills over 10 years killed over 2.6 million fish. In North Carolina in 1995, one hog CAFO spilled 22 million gallons of manure, killing 10 million fish and closing 365 thousand acres of coastal waters to shellfish harvesting and fishing. (Food & Water Watch) "Grower houses" are filled with so much waste that the environment around them is clouded and dusty, hurting even the air we breathe. (Schaffer)

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Contamination from manure includes arsenic and other toxic metals, antibiotics, leading to antibiotic resistance, and nitrates in drinking water, resulting in spontaneous abortions (“blue baby” syndrome) and stomach and other cancers. In May 2000, in Walkerton Ontario, about 1,300 people became ill and six died from bacteria from a CAFO’s manure in a city well. Stressed chickens lay Salmonella-tainted eggs. When too sick to work, people cannot buy things, hurting everyone’s ability to earn a living.

(Suddah) (McPhee)

“CAFOs appear to be efficient because they can externalize significant costs onto others and society at large.” (Schaffer) The number of hog farms in the U.S. dropped from almost 700,000 to less than 100,000 between 1980 and 2002, the period during which CAFOs took over most of the hog farming. (Ikerd) While CAFOs appear to produce pigs at \$6/cwt. (hundred weight) less cost than pasture farms and \$0.26/cwt. less than hoop farms, when subsidies and externalities like secondary water treatment are included, we find that CAFOs cost about \$6/cwt. of pig produced more than pasture farms and \$12/cwt. more than hoop farms. (Schaffer) (Ikerd) Unfortunately, the rich CAFOs use their power and money to get laws passed that help them compete against pasture farms and avoid paying for external costs. For example, Iowa tax rules like Iowa Code 427.1(19) taxes CAFOs based on their land instead of their buildings, and calling filthy and environmentally harmful manure pits tax-free “pollution control devices.” (Sierra Club) (Gurian) That helps CAFOs, because they do not have pasture land to tax. It also encourages them to crowd their animals even further while worsening contamination from manure.

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Even when CAFOs are slightly more efficient or profitable in terms of pig production, most of their total retail cost is in processing, distribution, advertising, packaging, etc. Less than one third represents the cost of raising live hogs, so the small increase in efficiency from CAFO hog production only saves consumers pennies on each dollar spent for pork at the supermarket. Hoop farms, the CAFOs' latest technological competitors, are more humane and more than a dollar per pig more profitable than CAFOs. (Ikerd) (Shaffer)

We do not need CAFOs. Let's keep them from taking over by donating our time or money to organizations that encourage smaller farms and limit CAFOs, like Jefferson County Farmers and Neighbors, Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, and the Animal Welfare Institute. Support laws that encourage small farms and limit CAFOs. Ask your state's Department of Natural Resources to enforce the Clean Water Act (CWA) by enforcing National Pollution Discharge Elimination System permits against CAFOs, which are the source of 69% of manure spills. If they don't listen, ask the EPA to take away their power to enforce the CWA. It is important not only to change the law, but to make sure it is enforced! (Schaffer) (AWI – How to Fight) (Gurian)

Buy organic and locally grown food from small farms instead of CAFO meals shipped, on average, 1,500 miles from the farm to the supermarket. Read food labels carefully: The law lets producers say "all natural" if the food did not receive additives after it was processed. That means the animals may have been treated inhumanely and given antibiotics and hormones while still alive, before "processing." Do your research about food labels, grocery stores and restaurants before buying. (Ikerd)

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There is still time to change course and spread a culture of kindness, economic wisdom, health and success for all. And it all starts with you.

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