

Factory Farming: Mechanized Madness

The green pastures and idyllic barnyard scenes of years past, which are still portrayed in children's books, have been replaced by windowless metal sheds, wire cages, gestation crates, and other confinement systems-what is now known as "factory farming."

Farmed animals have no legal protection from horrific abuses that would be illegal if they were inflicted on dogs or cats: neglect, mutilations, genetic manipulation, and drug regimens that cause chronic pain and crippling, transport through all weather extremes, and inhumane slaughter. Yet farmed animals are no less interesting, intelligent, or capable of feeling pain than are the dogs or cats whom we cherish as companions.

Deprivation and Disease

The factory farming system of modern agriculture strives to produce the most meat, milk, and eggs as quickly and cheaply as possible, and in the smallest amount of space possible. Cows, calves, pigs, chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, rabbits, and other animals are kept in small cages or stalls, often unable to turn around. They are deprived of exercise so that all their bodies' energy goes toward producing flesh, eggs, or milk for human consumption. They are fed drugs to fatten them faster and are genetically altered to grow faster or to produce much more milk or eggs than they would naturally.

Because crowding creates a prime atmosphere for disease, animals on factory farms are fed and sprayed with huge amounts of pesticides and antibiotics, which remain in their bodies and are passed on to the people who eat them, creating serious human health hazards. Both the World Health Organization and the American Medical Association have supported ending the use of antibiotics.(1,2) Although McDonald's has announced that it will phase out growth-promoting antibiotics, the fast-food chain is not likely to decrease overall antibiotic use.(3) The industry simply cannot raise the billions of animals per year that it does in such gruesome conditions without the drugs that allow their bodies to survive conditions that would otherwise kill them.

Chickens

Chickens are inquisitive animals, and when in their natural surroundings, they form friendships and social hierarchies, recognize one another and develop pecking orders, love and care for their young, and enjoy a full life that includes dust-bathing, making nests, and roosting in trees. On the factory farm, however, chickens are denied these activities.

Laying hens live in battery cages stacked tier upon tier in huge warehouses. Confined seven or eight to a cage, they don't have enough room to turn around or spread even one wing. Conveyor belts bring in food and water and carry away eggs and excrement. Farmers induce greater egg production through "forced molting": Chickens are denied food and light for days, which leads to feather and weight loss.(4) To prevent stress-induced behaviors caused by overcrowding, such as pecking their cagemates to death, hens are kept in semi-darkness, and the ends of their beaks are cut off with hot blades (without pain relief). The wire mesh of the cages rubs their feathers off, chafes their skin, and cripples their feet. Chickens can live for more than a decade, but laying hens on factory farms are exhausted and unable to produce as many eggs by the time they are 2 years old, so they're slaughtered.(5,6) More than 100 million "spent" hens die in slaughterhouses every year.(7) Ninety-eight percent of the egg industry's hens are in cages on factory farms.(8)

Nearly 9 billion "broiler" chickens are raised in sheds each year.(9) Artificial lighting is manipulated to keep the birds eating as often as possible. To keep up with demand and to reduce production costs, genetic selection calls for big birds and fast growth (it now takes only 6 weeks to "grow out" a chick to "processing" weight), which causes extremely painful joint and bone conditions.(10) Undercover investigations into the "broiler" chicken industry have repeatedly revealed birds who were suffering from dehydration, respiratory diseases, bacterial infections, heart attacks, crippled legs, and other serious ailments.

At the slaughterhouse, chickens are hung upside-down, their legs are snapped into metal shackles, their throats are slit open, and they are immersed in scalding hot water for feather removal. They are often conscious through the entire process.

Cattle

Cows who are left to roam pastures and care for their young form life-long friendships with one another and have demonstrated the ability to be vain, hold grudges, and play games.(11) But the cows raised for the meat and dairy industries are far removed from sun-drenched pastures and nursing calves.

Cattle raised for beef may be born in one state, fattened in another, and slaughtered in yet another. They are fed an unnatural diet of high-bulk grains and other "fillers," which can include expired dog and cat food, poultry feces, and leftover restaurant food.(12) They are castrated, their horns are ripped out of their heads, and they have third-degree burns inflicted on them (branding), all without any pain relief. During transportation, cattle are crowded into metal trucks where they suffer from trampling, temperature extremes, and lack of food, water, and veterinary care. At the slaughterhouse, cattle may be hoisted upside down by their hind legs and dismembered while fully conscious. The kill rate in a typical slaughterhouse is 400 animals per hour, and "the line is never stopped simply because an animal is alive," says one worker.(13)

Calves raised for veal are the male offspring of dairy cows. They're taken from their mothers within a few days of birth and chained in stalls only 2 feet wide and 6 feet long with slatted floors.(14) Since their mothers' milk is used for human consumption, the calves are fed a milk substitute designed to help them gain at least 2 pounds a day.(15) The diet is purposely low in iron so that the calves become anemic and their flesh stays pale and tender.(16)

Pigs

Pigs are very clean animals who take to the mud primarily to cool off and evade flies. They are just as friendly and gregarious as dogs, and according to Professor Donald Broom at the Cambridge University Veterinary School, "They have the cognitive ability to be quite sophisticated. Even more so than dogs and certainly three-year-olds."(17) Mother pigs on factory farms in the U.S. live most of their lives in individual crates 7 feet long by 2 feet wide.(18) They display signs of boredom and stress, such as biting the bars of the cage and gnashing their teeth.(19) Their piglets are taken away three weeks after birth and packed into pens until they are singled out to be raised for breeding or for meat.(20) Like chickens and turkeys, pigs are bred and pumped full of drugs, so that many become crippled under their own weight. Although pigs are naturally affable and social animals, the confinement of these crowded pens causes neurotic behaviors such as cannibalism and tail biting, so farmers use pliers to break off the ends of the piglets' teeth and chop off their tails-with no pain relief.(21)

Pigs are transported through all weather extremes, often freezing to the sides of the trucks in top pig-slaughtering states like Iowa and Nebraska or dying from dehydration in states like North Carolina. According to the industry, more than 100,000 pigs die en route to slaughter each year, and more than 400,000 arrive crippled from the journey.(22)

At the slaughterhouse, improper stunning means that many hogs reach the scalding water bath (intended to soften their skin and remove the hair) alive.(23) United States Department of Agriculture inspection records documented 14 humane slaughter violations at one processing plant, including finding hogs that "were walking and squealing after being stunned [with a stun gun] as many as four times."(24) A PETA investigation found workers at an Oklahoma farm killing pigs by slamming the animals' heads against the floor and beating them with a hammer.(25)

Environmental and Health Concerns

Factory farms are harmful to the environment as well: Factory farms produce billions of pounds of manure a day, which ends up in lakes, rivers, and drinking water. A Missouri hog farm paid a \$1 million fine for illegally dumping waste, causing the contamination of a nearby river and the deaths of more than 50,000 fish.(26)

Of all the agricultural land in the U.S., 80 percent is used to raise animals for food and to grow the grain to feed them-that's almost half the total land mass of the lower 48 states.(27) Chickens, pigs, cattle, and other animals raised for food are the primary consumers of half the water in the U.S.(28)

An estimated one out of every four cattle who enters a slaughterhouse may have E. coli.(29) A Consumer Reports study of nearly 500 supermarket chickens found campylobacter in 42 percent and salmonella in 12 percent, with up to 90 percent of the bacteria resistant to antibiotics.(30) Eggs pose a salmonella threat to one out of every 50 people each year.(31) In total, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that there are 76 million instances of foodborne illness each year, and more than 5,000 deaths.(32)

Laws and Lifestyles

One way to stop the abuses of factory farming is to support legislation that abolishes battery cages, veal crates, and intensive-confinement systems. Florida voters have banned the use of the tiny gestation crates used on hog farms.(33) The United Kingdom prohibits the use of gestation crates and veal crates.(34,35) The European Union is phasing out the use of battery cages as of 2012.(36)

The best way to save animals from the misery of factory farming is to stop buying and eating meat, milk, and eggs. Visit ExploreVeg.org for a free vegetarian starter kit.

Resources

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