

An hourglass-shaped graphic with a globe inside. The top bulb is dark blue, and the bottom bulb is light blue. The globe is a light blue color. The hourglass is centered on the page.

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Humane Treatment of Farm Animals: Overview and Issues

Geoffrey Becker, Resources, Science, and Industry Division

December 10, 2008

Abstract. Animal protection activists in the United States have long sought legislation to modify or curtail some practices considered by U.S. agriculture to be acceptable or even necessary to animal health. Members of Congress over the years have offered various bills that would affect animal care on the farm, during transport, or at slaughter; such proposals could again be introduced in the 111th Congress. Members of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees generally have expressed a preference for voluntary rather than regulatory approaches to humane care. Meanwhile, animal activists have won initiatives in several states to impose some care requirements on animal producers.

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Summary

Animal protection activists in the United States have long sought legislation to modify or curtail some practices considered by U.S. agriculture to be acceptable or even necessary to animal health. Members of Congress over the years have offered various bills that would affect animal care on the farm, during transport, or at slaughter; such proposals could again be introduced in the 111th Congress. Members of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees generally have expressed a preference for voluntary rather than regulatory approaches to humane care. Meanwhile, animal activists have won initiatives in several states to impose some care requirements on animal producers.

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Background

USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is responsible for enforcing the Animal Welfare Act (AWA; 7 U.S.C. 2131 et seq.), which requires minimum standards of care for certain warm-blooded animals bred for commercial sale, used in research, transported commercially, or exhibited to the public. However, the act excludes farm animals raised for food and fiber from coverage.¹

The Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (7 U.S.C. 1901 et seq.), enforced by USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), governs the humane slaughter and handling of livestock (but not poultry) at packing plants. Also, under the so-called Twenty-Eight Hour Law (49 U.S.C. 80502, last amended in 1994), many types of carriers "may not confine animals in a vehicle or vessel for more than 28 consecutive hours without unloading the animals for feeding, water, and rest."²

At the state level, laws to prevent deliberate animal cruelty sometimes apply to farm animals, but few states have prescribed on-farm treatment standards. That appears to be changing in states where animal activists have sponsored successful ballot measures to impose care standards on animal producers. In Florida, voters approved a 2002 ballot measure outlawing gestation crates for pigs; in Arizona, voters did the same, along with a veal stall ban, in 2006. In 2008, California, for examples, voters approved so-called Proposition 2, which will require that veal calves, egg-laying hens, and pregnant pigs be allowed to lie down, stand up, fully extend their limbs and turn around freely. The California law, to take effect in 2015, subjects violators to misdemeanor penalties of up to \$1,000 in fines and/or 180 days in jail.³

Criticisms of Animal Agriculture Practices

Many animal protection groups assert that today's intensive farming systems perpetuate standard practices that in their view are harmful to animals' well-being. Examples include:

- rearing large numbers of livestock or poultry in close confinement with little or no room for natural movement and activity (e.g., housing sows in small gestation crates, chickens in battery cages);
- isolating veal calves in small crates;
- performing surgery such as docking hog tails, dehorning cattle, and trimming poultry beaks (so that confined animals do not hurt each other or their handlers);
- permitting commercial movement of nonambulatory livestock ("downers") that are disabled due to sickness or injury; and
- not fully stunning poultry (which are not covered by the humane slaughter act) and, sometimes, livestock (most of which are covered) before slaughter.

¹ See CRS Report RS22493, *The Animal Welfare Act: Background and Selected Legislation*, by Geoffrey S. Becker.

² See also archived CRS Report 94-731, *Brief Summaries of Federal Animal Protection Statutes*, by Henry Cohen.

³ California Secretary of State, Voter Information Guide on Proposition 2, accessed November 18, 2008 at <http://www.voterguide.sos.ca.gov/title-sum/prop2-title-sum.htm>.

Some of these groups link intensive animal agriculture with soil and water pollution, food safety problems (e.g., misuse of animal drugs, and foodborne bacterial illnesses), and the decline of smaller-scale, “family” farms. They also believe that if regulators approve future applications of biotechnology—such as animal cloning, genetic alterations to improve productivity, and the use of livestock as “factories” for pharmaceuticals and human organs—animal well-being will be compromised. Some animal rights groups advance the more controversial argument that humans have no right to use animals for any purpose, including for food.

Defense of Animal Agriculture Practices

Farmers and ranchers maintain that they understand their animals’ welfare needs and address them adequately. They express concern that efforts by poorly informed critics could lead to costly and counterproductive regulations harmful to their industry and the animals alike. Agricultural, food processing, and a number of animal science groups have argued that support for science, education, and voluntary guidelines are more effective ways of assuring animal welfare.

Recognizing that more customers are concerned about animal treatment, some major food retailers have developed humane animal care standards their suppliers must follow. Also, various industry groups have published voluntary standards for care that they encourage members to meet, including the American Meat Institute, American Sheep Industry Association, National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, National Chicken Council, Pork Board, and United Egg Producers. Several of these, along with Certified Humane Raised and Handled, and Free Farmed of the American Humane Association, provide so-called third party certification programs intended to assure consumers that products were derived from producers who followed prescribed care standards. Some animal welfare groups contend that such voluntary industry standards are not strong or specific enough, are not enforceable, and/or are primarily marketing contrivances.

In Congress

Members of Congress have offered various proposals to require changes in the treatment of animals on the farm, during transport, or at slaughter. Members of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees, which generally have jurisdiction over such bills, have held hearings on various farm animal welfare issues, but they generally express a preference for voluntary rather than regulatory approaches to improving animal care.

On-Farm Care

In the 110th Congress, a key provision in the potentially sweeping Farm Animals Anti-Cruelty Act (H.R. 6202) stated, “[w]hoever, without justification, kills, mutilates, disfigures, tortures, or intentionally causes an animal held for commercial use pain or suffering, or has responsibility for an animal held for commercial use and fails to provide food, water, shelter, and health care as is necessary to assure the animal’s health and well-being appropriate to the animal’s age and species,” is subject to penalties of up to one year in jail and/or \$100,000 in fines. “Commercial use” would mean “use, or intended for use, as food or fiber or for food or fiber production.” A separate bill, H.R. 1726, would have required the federal government to purchase products derived from animals only if they were raised according to humane standards (i.e., had adequate shelter with sufficient space to walk and move around with limbs fully extended, had adequate food and water with no starvation or force-feeding, and had adequate veterinary care).

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Humane Slaughter

The treatment of farm animals reached center stage in February 2008, when USDA announced the largest-ever meat recall, by Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Co. The recall came after USDA-FSIS found that the facility for at least two years did not always notify inspectors about cattle that had become nonambulatory after they had been inspected, but before they were slaughtered for food. FSIS regulations explicitly prohibit most nonambulatory (“downer”) cattle in human food, because of their higher risk of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, or “mad cow disease”). Moreover, FSIS charged that the plant had violated the humane slaughter act, which first came to light after animal welfare advocates secretly videotaped what they described as employees inhumanely handling downer cattle before slaughter. The act stipulates, among other things, that “[n]o method of slaughtering or handling in connection with slaughtering shall be deemed to comply with the public policy of the United States unless it is humane.”

In a number of subsequent 2008 hearings, FSIS came under strong criticism for failing to enforce the act. This was despite the fact that Congress had included, in the 2002 farm law (P.L. 107-171, Section 10305), a resolution urging USDA to fully enforce it and to report the number of violations to Congress annually. Since then, Congress has directed millions of dollars to FSIS for full-time inspectors to oversee compliance, and for incorporation of a humane tracking system into the agency’s field computer systems. (See also CRS Report RS22819, *Nonambulatory Livestock and the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act*, by Geoffrey S. Becker.)

Downers

In 2005, the Senate-passed version of H.R. 2744, USDA’s FY2006 appropriation, included a floor amendment, sponsored by Senator Akaka, to prohibit nonambulatory livestock (also called “downers”) from being used for human food. The Akaka amendment would have applied not only to nonambulatory cattle (which by FSIS regulation are already generally banned from the food supply), but also to any sheep, swine, goats, horses, mules or other equines unable to stand or walk unassisted at inspection. The House version lacked such a ban, and conferees removed the Senate language prior to final passage (P.L. 109-97). The proposal re-emerged in the 110th Congress as S. 394 and H.R. 661—which also would have required that nonambulatory livestock be humanely euthanized rather than slaughtered. S. 2770 contained similar provisions and also would have set gradually increasing penalties for violations.

Horse Slaughter

For many years, horse protection groups have sought to end the slaughter of horses for human food. Policy issues focus on the acceptability of the practice and on how to dispose of or care for unwanted horses no longer being slaughtered. Until 2007, two foreign-owned plants in Texas and one in Illinois slaughtered horses for human food (105,000 in 2006), all for export. On January 19, 2007, however, a federal appeals court panel declared a Texas law banning commerce in horsemeat to be enforceable, effectively closing the two plants there. The remaining foreign plant in Illinois closed later in 2007 after a federal appeals court ruled that a new state law banning the practice was constitutional. The U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear the case in June 2008.

These developments had occurred as Congress considered a succession of measures to ban or otherwise limit equine slaughter. During respective floor debates on USDA’s FY2006 appropriation (P.L. 109-97), the House and Senate approved amendments to ban use of

appropriated funds to pay for the inspection of these horses. The presumption was that since inspection is required for any meat to enter the human food supply, a ban on inspection funding would halt the practice. However, the three plants petitioned USDA for voluntary ante-mortem inspection services, as authorized by the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1946, with the ante-mortem portion funded by user fees. USDA agreed to this plan, which took effect in early 2006. Subsequently, the FY2008 USDA appropriation (§ 741, Division A, of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2008, P.L. 110-161) both prohibited the use of appropriated funds to inspect horses prior to slaughter for human food, and also the USDA rule (see above) that provided for the collection of user fees.

Animal welfare groups have continued to seek new federal legislation, such as companion bills H.R. 503/S. 311, and H.R. 6598 in the 110th Congress, permanently ending horse slaughter for human food. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), which has opposed the bills, has asserted that horses that otherwise would have been transported and slaughtered in the United States—under more humane conditions—are now going to Mexico and Canada for processing. In 2007, more than 44,000 horses were shipped for slaughter to Mexico and 35,000 to Canada, respectively a 312% and 41% increase from 2006, according to AVMA. Bill supporters argued that one of the intents of H.R. 503/S. 311 and of H.R. 6598 was to prevent such exports; bill critics countered that once horses leave the country, enforcement and oversight would be problematic at best. A separately pending bill (H.R. 6278) would have prohibited the interstate transportation of horses in double-decked trailers. (See also CRS Report RS21842, *Horse Slaughter Prevention Bills and Issues*, by Geoffrey S. Becker.)

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