

The Lowdown on Factory Farms

Meat production in the United States has changed dramatically over the past 20 years. Many facilities where livestock are raised today are closer to factories, not the idyllic, small-scale family farms that Americans envision.

These “factory farms” are also known as concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). They emphasize high volume and profit with little concern for human health, safe food, the environment, humane treatment of animals, and the rural economy. While factory farms vary by animal type and region, the defining characteristic of a factory farm is that hundreds to thousands of animals (mainly cows, pigs, chickens or turkeys) are confined tightly together and provided little access to sunlight, fresh air or room for natural movement. Some facilities produce millions of animals annually.

They Are Spreading!

Over the years, animal farms have gotten bigger and denser. And in the process, many small farms have been squeezed out of the agriculture business. More than half of U.S. livestock are now produced on just 5 percent of farms. Giant meat companies are now spreading their factory farms to other parts of the world, like Eastern Europe and Central America, where environmental and labor laws are even weaker.



Public Health Problems

Factory farms have a long track record of polluting water with manure, which can cause E.coli and Salmonella contamination in drinking water. Too-fast line speeds in slaughterhouses and crowded conditions in factory farms also spread food-borne illness like E.coli. Definitely not what you want on your dinner plate!

In the last few years, research has revealed other serious health problems caused by factory farms. According to the American Public Health Association (APHA), studies suggest that overuse of antibiotics for livestock is creating antibiotic-resistant bacteria that threatens human health. In fact, an estimated 70% of antibiotics used in the United States are for promoting growth and preventing disease in farm animals. Moreover, health problems for farm workers, as well as neighbors, have been connected to air toxins from factory farms. The deadly toxins these facilities release can cause anything from bronchitis to death. In light of factory farms’ many problems, APHA recently passed a resolution advocating a ban on new factory farms.

Environmental Consequences

When a manure “lagoon” burst in 1995 at a North Carolina hog facility, it spilled 25 million gallons of manure into the New River - more than twice the amount of oil spilled by the Exxon Valdez. This spill alone killed 10 million fish and contaminated more than 350,000 acres of coastal shellfish habitat.¹ This led North Carolina to impose a statewide moratorium on new factory farms in 1997. Nationwide, factory farms foul public water sources, create “dead zones” in water bodies, and harm wildlife. There are few, if any, consequences for most factory farms when they violate EPA regulations. (More than a third of the largest factory farms don’t even have a government permit.) This weak oversight turns a blind eye to serious polluters.

What's that Smell?

Neighbors to factory farms across the country are at their wits end. Residents recount stench so terrible they have to keep windows closed trash cans year-round, manure piles that catch fire and burn for months, and sick children. Factory farms negatively impact rural communities as they crowd out small-scale family farms in every sector of U.S. livestock farming and cause significant environmental damage.

These communities have been fighting lonely, uphill battles against companies who want to take advantage of lax zoning and environmental laws. Often, there is little that local communities can do to stop these factory farms from coming into their neighborhood.

Hope on the Horizon

A quiet consumer revolution has taken the food industry by storm. Well-organized communities have successfully stopped factory farms. People are flocking to farmer's markets. Consumers want to know where their meat, milk, and eggs come from and how they were produced.



Animal waste at factory farms is stored in vast lagoons that can contaminate local water and air.

To find sustainably-raised meat and dairy products, go to the Eat Well Guide.

Our factory farm campaign aims to end government policies that promote factory farms, fight corporate control that forces farmers “to get big or get out,” and encourage sustainably-raised meat and dairy products. Farmers, neighbors, and consumers deserve better than factory farms. Join us in our fight to take back our communities and our food system!

Endnotes

¹ Williams, Ted. “Assembly Line Swine,” *Audubon Magazine*, (March-April 1998), p. 28.

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