

SLAUGHTERHOUSES AND PROCESSING

The drastic expansion of industrial animal production in the United States has been accompanied by the rapid consolidation of the meat industry. This industry is now dominated by a handful of huge corporations that process most of the country's meat at enormous facilities, and consolidation continues to increase. As a result, meat packing companies have become increasingly powerful, while the government bodies that regulate them have done little to keep them in line.

FOOD SAFETY

Federal health authorities estimate that food-borne diseases in the United States sicken 76 million people, cause 325,000 hospitalizations, and kill 5,000 Americans every year. Likewise, a number of studies have confirmed the presence of harmful bacteria in meat in the United States. After collecting ground beef samples from meat processing plants around the country in 1996, the USDA determined that 7.5 percent of the beef samples were contaminated with salmonella, 11.7 percent were contaminated with listeria monocytogenes, 30 percent were contaminated with staphylococcus aureus, and 53.3 percent were contaminated with clostridium perfringens. These unacceptable levels of contamination are caused by the filthy conditions in which conventional food animals are raised, as well as the high speed at which meat is processed. In order to maximize profits, meat processors have continually increased the speed of their production lines. Twenty years ago, meat-packing plants slaughtered about 175 cattle an hour. Today plants can slaughter as many as 400 cattle per hour.

The USDA cannot order mandatory product recalls when companies persistently violate food safety rules. Upon discovery of contaminated meat, the USDA can only suggest a recall and consult with a company about how they should handle the situation. Such voluntary recalls would be issued by the company, and then published to the public by the USDA, and can range in size from 100 pounds to several hundred thousand pounds of product. In 2008, the USDA published the largest meat recall in history: 143 million pounds of beef. In 2007, United Food Group issued a recall of 5.7 million pounds of fresh and frozen beef and Topps

Meat Company issued a recall of 21.7 million pounds of beef. Both were a reaction to possible E.Coli contamination.

MEAT INSPECTION

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulates all meat production and sale in the United States, and meat is the only consumer product in the nation that comes with a government seal of approval

on the package. Despite its mandate to ensure consumer safety, the USDA has failed to effectively maintain the safety of the U.S. meat supply due to weak regulations and lack of enforcement powers over meat companies.

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In 1996 the USDA introduced a meat inspection program called the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) system, which was intended to modernize meat inspection and introduce testing for the bacteria that make people sick. Unfortunately, HACCP allows many inspection tasks to be carried out by the meat companies themselves, reducing the oversight of USDA inspectors. Companies driven by profit have an obvious conflict of interest when deciding whether to slow or stop production in order to deal with a problem or pull potentially contaminated meat from the line. Under HACCP, the USDA has actually discouraged its inspectors from stopping production lines; one USDA memo stated that inspectors would be held responsible for halting production unless there was absolute evidence of product contamination.

The USDA cannot shut down a plant that does not meet sanitation requirements. As a result, there are often lengthy delays between the discovery of unsanitary

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processing plants and action taken to improve these conditions. In 2002, Public Citizen and the Government Accountability Project discovered that even after repeatedly testing positive for salmonella contamination, several ground beef processing plants were allowed to continue to sell meat for several months before steps were taken to clean up their facilities.

WORKER SAFETY

In 1996, meat packing workers were listed as having the highest rate of repeat trauma disorders (like carpal tunnel syndrome, which develops over long periods of time). In 1998, nearly 30 percent of U.S. meat packing plant workers sustained a work-related injury or illness, making meat packing the most dangerous job in the country in terms of non-fatal injuries. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics from 2003 to 2007 showed the rate of illnesses and injuries for workers in “animal slaughtering and processing” was over twice the national average, and the rate of illness alone was over ten times the national average. Common

ailments among slaughterhouse workers include back problems, torn muscles and pinched nerves, as well as more dramatic injuries such as broken bones, deep cuts, and amputated fingers and limbs. Given the high incidence of worker injury, the recurrence of sanitary violations at meat processing facilities, and continual outbreaks of food-borne illnesses caused by contaminated meat, it is clear that the U.S. meat processing industry is in dire need of reform.

DID YOU KNOW?

- In 1997, four companies processed 80 percent of all steers and heifers in the United States.
- Some of the biggest meat processing companies in the United States are Tyson, Cargill, Swift & Co., National Beef Packing, Five Rivers (Smithfield and ContiBeef), Smithfield Foods, Pilgrim's Pride and Butterball.

What You Can Do...

Fortunately, there are many sustainable farmers and ranchers throughout the United States that care about where their animals are processed. So if you buy directly from a farmer

or rancher, he or she will be able to tell you exactly where the meat was processed and what kind of practices that plant uses.



To find sustainably raised food near you
visit www.eatwellguide.org.

Find more detailed information about slaughterhouses on our website
at www.sustainabletable.org/issues/slaughterhouses.

