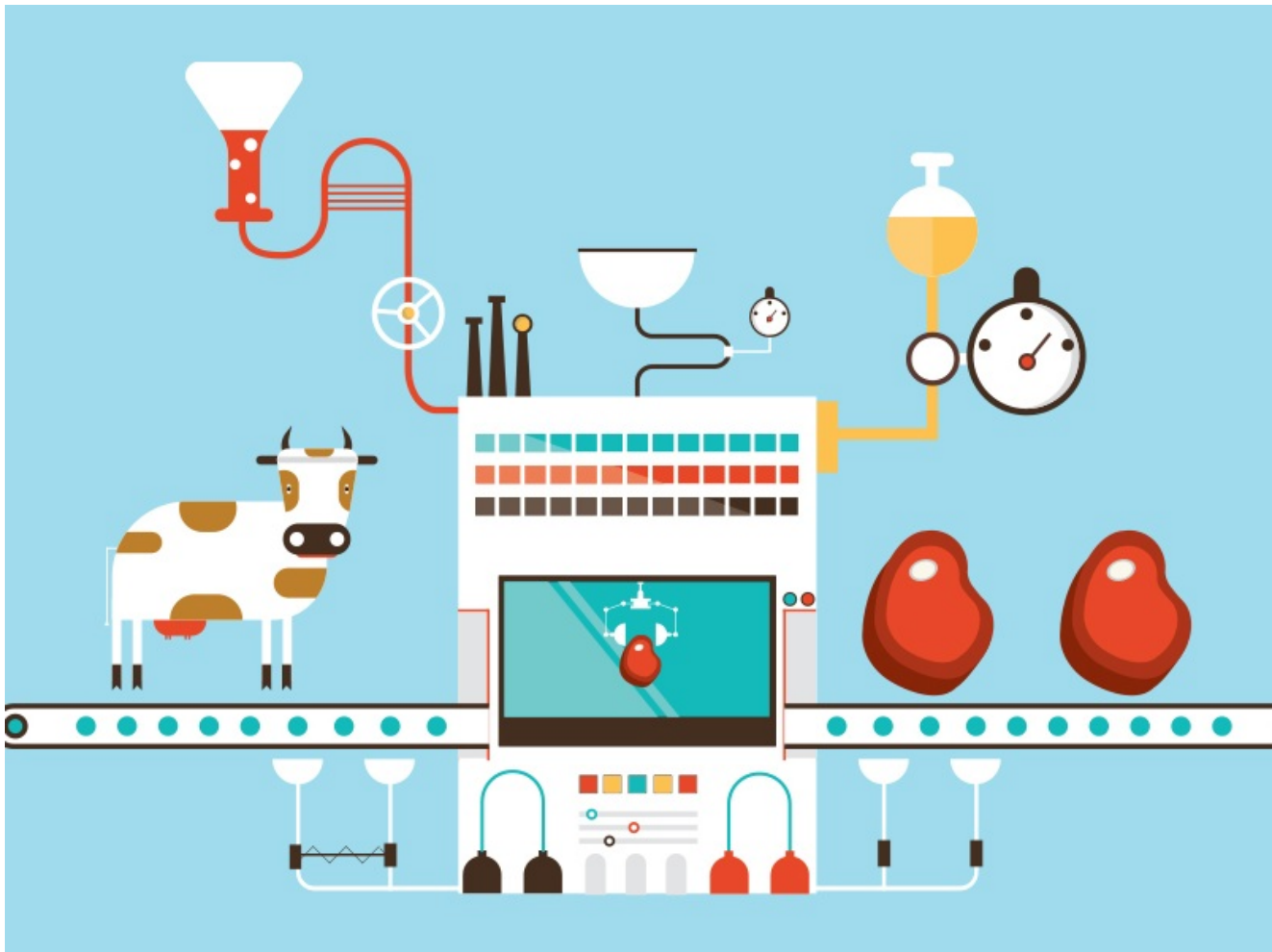


Beyond Factory Farms: ‘Big Meat’ Comes at High Cost

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Kevin Walker, a Michigan State University professor and author of *The Grand Food Bargain and the Mindless Drive for More*, says, “Meat is the poster child of industrial food gone awry.” Independent animal farmers are disappearing while factory farms are getting bigger, causing more air, soil and water pollution in rural communities nationwide, reports the [Center for a Livable Future \(CLF\) at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health](#).

Large industrialized farms known as concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) rely on the routine use of antibiotics to both prevent the spread of disease and promote animal growth and weight gain—a practice known to fuel antibiotic resistance and compromise human health.

High Cost of Cheap Meat

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a push toward greater efficiency created the shift to industrial livestock production. However, attempts to maximize production for higher returns at minimal cost come at a price.

For example, a growing body of evidence shows that CAFOs lead to the social and economic decline of rural communities. “Research has consistently found that living near a CAFO is associated with an array of negative health impacts, including respiratory disease, mental health problems and certain types of infections,” says Kieve Nachman, Ph.D., director of the CLF Food Production and Public Health Program.

Everett Murphy, M.D., a retired pulmonologist from Kansas City, concurs, “Not only are the odors from factory livestock farms offensive, but individuals living within three miles of industrial animal operations are at risk for serious, life-shortening illnesses and permanent disabilities.” Concrete reservoirs designed to hold manure present a problem as well, he adds, “They always leak into the groundwater, spreading antibiotic-resistant bacteria and making the source of water to neighboring communities unusable and toxic.”

Joan Olive says she is living proof that exposure to air pollution from factory farms is every bit as harmful as scientists and health experts have warned about for years. On one fateful December day 16 years ago, Olive was outdoors on her family farm near Spencer, Iowa, when she noticed a strong, sickening odor. Feeling nauseous, she went inside, but later that evening, her tongue swelled, she became disoriented and began shaking and sweating profusely.

Olive’s symptoms subsided over the next few days, but since then she has experienced multiple chemical sensitivities, transient symptoms of brain fog, muscle twitching, migraines, and respiratory and circulatory problems. Health experts at the University of Iowa identified the source of the sickening odor as toxic hydrogen sulfide from liquid CAFO waste that had been sprayed on farmland one mile from Olive’s home. In addition to the region’s concentration of hog CAFOs, her home sat two miles from 1.5 million chickens.

Today, Olive drinks filtered water and eats organic food to protect her health, but she

notices that her symptoms return when triggered by exposure to CAFO air pollution and pesticides. In March, Olive moved to Spearfish, South Dakota, where she's breathing easier and enjoying time outdoors. But she believes she left behind "thousands of rural residents who are having their lives and health destroyed by Big Ag."

There Ought to be a Law

"Government oversight and policies designed to safeguard the health of individuals and the environment from these operations have been inadequate," says Bob Martin, director of the CLF Food System Policy Program.

Citing environmental and public health hazards, the American Public Health Association issued a new policy statement last November calling for a precautionary moratorium on all new and expanding CAFOs. It advises a complete halt until additional scientific data has been collected and public health concerns addressed.

Bypassing Industrial Eating

Many consumers don't realize that the majority of beef, pork and chicken sold in supermarkets, served in restaurants and distributed to institutions nationwide comes from the industrial food system. According to the [Public Justice Food Project](#), 85 percent of the meat Americans consume is produced by four corporate giants—Tyson, Smithfield, Cargill and JBS—each accused of hiding labor, animal or environmental abuses behind folksy brand names and packaging images.

To shed light on abuses and steer consumers away from industrial meat, the [Center for Food Safety](#) created a website that pulls back the curtain on CAFOs. It recommends replacing half of the meat we eat with humane, sustainably raised, grass-fed and organic meat, while replacing the other half with plant-based sources of protein such as beans, peas, lentils, nuts and seeds—a dietary approach that benefits our gut microbes and protects us against a host of chronic diseases.

Meat Alternatives

As concerns mount about the health, ethical and environmental impact of animal products, the food industry has responded with more plant-based, lab-grown meat alternatives. Yet, according to the *Food and Technology 2019* [report by the market research firm The Hartman Group](#), many meat replacements rely on highly sophisticated technologies that hardly meet consumers' definitions of "natural".

"It's all about what isn't on the label," says Urvashi Rangan, Ph.D., chief science advisor of the [GRACE Communications Foundation](#). According to Rangan, many plant-based and fake meat products are actually ultra-processed foods that contain genetically engineered ingredients and rely on petroleum-based chemicals that are not required to be listed on the label.

"The Impossible Burger introduces over 48 new proteins to the human diet without a thorough safety investigation," warns Rangan. She questions whether these new meat alternatives are better than meat from animals raised on pasture without routine drugs and synthetic fertilizers.

There's a big difference between the health and environmental impact of meat from animals raised in feed lots versus those raised with regenerative agricultural practices. "Industrial agriculture is absolutely harmful," reports [A Greener World](#), a nonprofit certifier of the trustworthy Animal Welfare Approved label. But thinking we have to go vegan or purchase fake meat to protect our health or the planet is misguided.

Eating Less, But Better Meat

"Our bodies are designed to be omnivores, and animal products are part of a diverse, real food diet," says Rebecca Thistlethwaite, director of the [Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network](#) at Oregon State University. Thistlethwaite, author of *Farms with a Future* and *The New Livestock Farmer: The Business of Raising and Selling Ethical Meat*, believes in ancestral eating and eating as close to nature as possible. She is mindful of portion size and eats only organic and pasture-raised animal foods to avoid synthetic chemicals and pharmaceuticals.

Will Harris, owner of White Oak Pastures, in Bluffton, Georgia, declares, “It’s not the cow, it’s the how.” Harris transitioned his livestock operation from the industrial model to certified humane animal husbandry and sustainable practices that emulate nature. The switch to a pasture-based system yields healthier animals, he explains, and helps take carbon out of the atmosphere and back into the soil.

In *Cows Save the Planet and Other Improbable Ways of Restoring Soil to Heal the Earth*, author Judith Schwartz describes how grazing animals play a key role in restoring soil health, and therefore human health. “Well-managed pastures and grasslands with ruminant animals can sequester more carbon than they emit, improve soil health and increase groundwater recharge,” explains Thistlethwaite. Plus, both livestock and poultry can make use of inedible feeds that humans don’t consume, such as grass and sagebrush.

Power To the People

Rangan and Harris emphasize that the power of consumer spending can shift the market. However, Thistlethwaite says, “We cannot just vote with our forks, as many people don’t have that luxury.” She urges change at both personal and political levels, favoring incentive-based approaches with fewer subsidies going to the industrial system.

“We need more farmers raising high-quality animals in a humane, ecologically responsible manner,” says Thistlethwaite. But we also need more small-scale slaughterhouses and meat processors throughout the country to get quality meat to more of our tables.

In addition to farmers’ markets, cooperatives and community supported agriculture, organizations such as the American Grassfed Association and Local Harvest connect consumers directly to farmers using sustainable practices to help rebuild regional food hubs and networks.

“Start with small steps,” suggests Thistlethwaite. “Buy milk from a local creamery, eggs from a farmer in your community or one-quarter cow to fill your freezer from a local, grass-fed beef producer. Reward the farms and ranches that are doing it right by purchasing from them, promoting them, supporting them.”

Melinda Hemmelgarn, the “Food Sleuth,” is an award-winning registered dietitian, writer and nationally syndicated radio host based in Columbia, MO. Reach her at FoodSleuth@gmail.com. Tune into Food Sleuth Radio at [KOPN Radio](#).

Critical Questions to Find and Support Good Food

- Where does my food come from?
- Who produced it and under what conditions?
- Were workers treated fairly and animals humanely?
- What’s in or on my food?
- Were pesticides, antibiotics, hormones, genetically modified ingredients or additives used in producing it?
- Is it rich or poor in nutrients?
- What might be the unintended consequences of my food and farming choices?
- How might those choices affect our environment and future generations?

Learn More, Eat Smarter

[Center for Food Safety](#)

[Consumer Reports](#)

[Food Print](#)

[Friends of the Earth](#)

[A Greener World](#)

[10 Things You Can Do for the Planet Instead of Giving Up On Animal Agriculture](#)

[Humane Society Food Industry Scorecard](#)

[Keep Antibiotics Working](#)

[Public Justice Food Project](#)

[Right to Harm film and resources](#)

[One Hundred Thousand Beating Hearts film](#)

Editor's note: Take Action to Stop Factory Farms

The COVID-19 health crisis highlights inequalities in how we produce and distribute food. A new bill, the Farm System Reform Act (FSRA), will help to create a more healthy, sustainable and equitable model, by placing a moratorium on new Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (commonly known as factory farms), cracking down on the monopolistic practices of multinational meat corporations and supporting farmers to transition to healthier, pasture-based models and organic farming. To support the FSRA, the Sierra Club has made it easy to contact members of Congress.