

Why Industrial Livestock Factories Want to Silence Whistleblowers

The current method of raising most of the animals producing meat, milk and eggs is in industrial livestock production facilities¹. Thousands of animals live under the roof of a production facility, never seeing sunlight and never having an opportunity to exercise outdoors.

Behind the closed doors of the livestock factory building, the producer and employees labor in relative secrecy, out of the glaring eyes of inspectors and members of the public. Most of us are unaware of how the animals are treated. In fact, very few occurrences are reported where CAFO (concentrated animal feeding operation) animals are treated inhumanely.

However, several videos have been released that show horrendous abuse of CAFO animals. In 2008, an undercover video exposed how inhumanely downer cows were treated as employees of a slaughterhouse in California attempted to coax the cows into the slaughterhouse.² A downer is an animal that cannot walk. If an animal is unable to walk, then it is not allowed to be slaughtered and used for human consumption. Then in the fall of 2008, undercover investigators recorded the mistreatment of piglets at a CAFO in Greene County, Iowa.³ In 2009, Mercy for Animals released video from Iowa-based Hy-Line Hatchery where unwanted live male chicks were tossed into grinding machines.⁴ These videos were created by whistleblowers who were employed at the CAFOs.



Photo courtesy NRCS, Jeff Vanuga

More recently whistleblowers entered an Iowa CAFO and taped the euthanizing of hogs who were not delivered to slaughterhouses during the coronavirus pandemic.⁵ Another report of an Iowa CAFO found pigs with “severe rectal prolapses and intense overcrowding with noxious ammonia in the air and excrement coating the floors”.⁶

Upon the exposure of the abuse of the piglets, industrial livestock representatives declared their disgust at the actions directed toward the piglets as shown in the video. Dr. Tom Burkgren, of the American Association of Swine Veterinarians, stated “It’s certainly given us a wakeup call and the wakeup call is we can always do better. But the story that never gets out is that pork producers wake up every morning and go to work trying to make a living. They run their operations humanely and they like working with pigs and it’s their livelihood. That’s really the good story that never gets told.”⁷ Steve Waver, president of the

¹ Industrial livestock factories are otherwise known as concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) or factory farms.

² “USDA Rejects ‘Downer’ Cow Ban”, Christopher Lee, Washington Post, February 29, 2008

³ “PETA Unveils Hog Farm Abuse Video”, Market to Market, Iowa Public Television, September 19, 2008

⁴ Dan Flynn, “Iowa Approves Nation’s First ‘Ag-Gag’ Law”, Food Safety News, March 1, 2012, <http://www.foodsafetynews.com/2012/03/iowa-approves-nations-first-ag-gag-law/#.U-O8zaOmWkg>

⁵ “Farmers still euthanizing pigs as packing plants reopen”, KCCI, May 29, 2020

⁶ Donnelle Eller, “Animal rights group claims animal neglect at farm of Iowa senator who backed ag-gag law”, Des Moines Register, January 24, 2020

⁷ “PETA Unveils Hog Farm Abuse Video”, Market to Market, Iowa Public Television, September 19, 2008

Pork Board, wrote that “The pork industry condemns the abuse of any animal. The National Pork Board and America’s pork producers take their ethical responsibility for the proper care of pigs seriously and will not tolerate any mistreatment of animals.”⁸

Yet the industrial livestock industry has moved to silence whistleblowers who detect that things are not quite as humane as they should be.

The industry obviously was so concerned about the public becoming aware of mistreatment of CAFO animals that they convinced legislators to enact an Iowa law, commonly called an ag-gag law. That law created a new crime called animal production facility fraud which includes obtaining access to a facility under false pretenses or making a false statement or representation as part of an application for employment at an animal facility. They also have created a food trespass law which would set criminal penalties on those who enter or remain on the property of a food operation, including a CAFO, without the consent of the owner or operator.



Photo courtesy NRCS, Jeff Vanuga

There are several conclusions that can be made about the effort to silence and criminalize whistleblowers:

- The abuse must be widespread if whistleblowers have to be silenced. If there were only one or two bad actors, the industry as a whole would be asking for the bad actors to shape up or get out of the business.
- The conditions under which animals are raised in factory buildings must be horrible, so horrible that the industry does not want the public to know about it.
- The producers and the owners of the animals must be desperate, since they apparently are not able to effectively change their practices and, thus, must engage in covering up the abuse. Otherwise they would have no reason to hide what is happening in the CAFO factories.
- The industry knows that if the public finds out what is really happening to the animals in CAFO factories, they would demand significant changes. The only way the industry can prevent those changes is to preemptively stifle the whistleblowers, censor the media who gain access to the undercover reports and videos and silence the public who will demand effective changes.

One can only conclude that the conditions in the animal factories must be horrible. The public has a right to know how its food is raised; the public has a right to discuss those practices and conditions; and, further, in a democracy, the public has a right to demand that the industry change its ways.

The issues that the public needs to be able to discuss include humane treatment of animals, threats to the health and safety of our food supply, protection of the health and safety of the workers, appropriate treatment of waste and deceased animals so that the environment is not polluted, appropriate use of antibiotics and hormones, mandatory reporting of abuses to CAFO animals and appropriate access to veterinarian care. The public also needs to discuss if there should be increased inspection of the facilities, if the current environmental regulations are adequate and if current penalties are satisfactory to stop others from violating laws. By silencing whistleblowers, the industry wants to ensure that the discussion does not happen.

If the CAFO industry were operating with good practices, there would be no need for the industry representatives to support a whistleblower restraint rule.

⁸ “PETA Unveils Hog Farm Abuse Video”, Market to Market, Iowa Public Television, September 19, 2008