

Testimony
Of
Mr. Bev Eggleston

**Domestic Policy Subcommittee
Oversight and Government Reform Committee**

Thursday, April 17, 2008

2154 Rayburn HOB

2:00 P.M.

***“After the Beef Recall: Exploring Greater Transparency
In the Meat Industry”***

Good Afternoon, Chairman Kucinich, Ranking Member Issa and Members of the Domestic Policy Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to share with you my testimony in this hearing, “After the Recall: Exploring Greater Transparency in the Meat Industry, regarding transparency in the meat industry from the prospective of small plants.

I am the founder of a small USDA meat plant, Ecofriendly Foods. Our mission is to provide a “successful model of humane and ethical standards for grass-based farming...[and] a ‘holistic’ approach to raise, harvest and market products”¹. Transparency is fundamental to the mission and goals of Ecofriendly Foods. Our unique facility was created as a multi-species, certified humane prototype specifically for small family farms, the animals which they raise, and the consumers that depend on this relationship. We have invested in the infrastructure and awareness needed to offer a product that satisfies the emerging conscious consumer looking for humanely treated animals raised in a sustainable, environmentally-friendly way. Those customers hold our business accountable for the whole process that brings meat to their table. However, Ecofriendly Foods is also closely accountable to producers, who have a similar mission and commitment to an environmentally and animal-friendly process. Because the whole process from animal to plate happens locally, we are able to maintain our open door policy that welcomes producers and consumers alike to visit and tour our facility. In addition to their personal commitment to the mission, these patrons thank us with every purchase.

¹ Retrieved 4-14-08 from <http://www.ecofriendly.com/>

Through Ecofriendly Foods' open door policy for producers and consumers, transparency does not entail an additional cost to our small plant. Because we verbally testify to our mission with each sale of our meat, affirming that it is organic, humanely-treated, grass fed, etc., the customer can be confident about the history of the meat they are purchasing. Therefore, they can purchase freely without compromising their values to offer meat to their families. For our customer base, this awareness is critical. This type of conscious consuming has emerged directly from consumer frustration, dissatisfaction, and mistrust. A growing number of consumers will say they don't want to know where their food comes from because they know enough "not to want to know any more". As a result, there is an enormous gap in knowledge in this culture about food production, especially with the newest generation, many of whom erroneously believe that food comes from the supermarket. Not only is this a threat to basic food security, but it affects health and culture as well. If the mainstream process of meat production were not so disturbing and consumers could come to the industry with open eyes, consumption could be honorable, respected, and even an artistic means of cultural and self-expression as it is for many Ecofriendly Foods customers. Food that is not riddled with the "don't ask, don't tell" policy can be nourishing on so many levels, physically, socially, and environmentally.

However, this requires the level of transparency that already exists for small plants like Ecofriendly Foods, one that monitors the whole process from farm to fridge. Transparency is in dire need in mainstream, large plants as evidenced by the recent events leading to the beef recall and many other separate testimonies and events that have undermined the credibility of such facilities. For our small plant, our customers are the emerging conscious consumers scared off from mainstream meat because of the shocking evidence of how animals are treated in such facilities and the health concerns that they see resulting from consumption of such products. As an alternative, our customer are supporting an ecofriendly, small scale facility where they are welcome to come tour all aspects of their food production. Farm accessibility allows customers and producers to view the humane and ethical handling facilities where animals are harvested, which provides accountability needed for safe and prideful meat consumption. If a plant has nothing to hide, then the interested public should be able to enter, view, and learn about food production, which will hopefully renew the historical knowledge that food production ought to be revered. However, reverence, respect, and confident consumption are only possible if the process is transparent.

Unlike large-scale producers, the financial costs associated with surveillance technology are prohibitive for small plants. However, the open door policy of small plants like Ecofriendly Foods is a form of existing transparency that distinguishes small plants from large ones. As a result, deliberate regulations and procedures are needed to ensure transparency of large plants. Small plants like Ecofriendly Foods maintain and expand their customer base because of the humane and sustainable way that they provide meat, ensured through personal witness. However, a federal surveillance program is necessary for large plants that do not have witnesses entering their facilities to ensure the integrity of their process.

If video surveillance were used to monitor such facilities, the subsequent issue would be how to effectively screen live or recorded footage for regulation infractions. One possible alternative would be to commission third-party monitors, perhaps the social activists for animal rights and/or environmental organizations. Because of their mission-driven vigilance, these groups could offer competent monitors. This could serve the dual purpose of providing a hands-on form of activism that such groups desire while fulfilling the need for monitors to screen for and record breaches of the standards set forth by the USDA. With proper training, many members of civil society could aid in this process.

Of course, in order for a surveillance system to be effective, there must be an established protocol for penalizing violations. Perhaps if a predetermined number of violations are noted, a non-compliance report can be issued. After a certain number of non-compliance reports are given to any one plant or company, it would receive fines, potential shut down, and even recall of its products during the time period of the breach. Such fines could potentially help offset taxpayer costs of installing and implanting a federal surveillance program. However, I believe most consumers would support such a program especially if they are aware of the problems and possible implications associated with a meat industry that lacks transparency.

In conclusion, as a small plant operator, I believe that a system of surveillance is essential to a transparent and accountable meat industry. It is obvious that for small plants like mine, that surveillance comes from the open door policy allowing consumers and producers access to our facilities. It also comes from the clear and stated mission of our plant. Because we are dedicated to this mission, we have developed our own system of monitoring

and evaluation via a consortium of small farmers to ensure the control and accountability of our plant. Therefore, we have established an effective and functioning surveillance system. It is imperative to the meat industry, that all plants be required to implement such established means of assuring accountability. In order to safeguard transparency, a federal surveillance program for large producers which allows government and interested consumers to view all aspects of a facility's operations is necessary and warranted. Although industry lobbyists with undoubtedly oppose such transparency, given the evidence of foul play in the meat industry, it would be a positive step for the entire industry if all USDA slaughter/processing plants were subject to measures that ensure transparency.

Sincerely,

Beverly P. Eggleston, IV