

Testimony
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“After the Beef Recall: Exploring Greater Transparency in the Meat Industry”

Introduction

I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today on this important matter. The recent incident in California has brought animal welfare and food safety to the forefront of discussions inside and outside the US meat industry. Animal producers, meat processors, and the entire food chain are anxious about potential outcomes after the egregious acts of animal cruelty were brought to light in California. People I have spoken with have been uniformly concerned that a few bad actors have damaged the image of the animal industries. Indeed, the recent cattle incident has spilled across state lines and over multiple species. Animal producers, processors and the USDA are on high alert at this time.

I have observed the animal industries for several decades. Like many of my colleagues, I have noticed considerable improvements in animal handling on farms, during handling, transportation and final harvest. Still, meat production is a biologic process and it is imperfect. The degree of acceptable imperfection is an important topic of discussion.

The recent events and the current state of affairs of meat industry oversight cause me to reach the following conclusions.

1. The current system of oversight is not sufficient to prevent rare events that significantly compromise animal welfare and food safety; the current system reduces but far from eliminates risk of animal welfare or food safety issues

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2. A single person from a single federal agency observing animals and people (at a given site) less than 100% of the time is not sufficient to prevent a human-induced error (or even crime)
3. Even if one gained 100% oversight by a single agency, people would still experience observer fatigue and potential callousness, and no check and balance would be in place
4. Persons found guilty of cruelty should be brought to justice
5. Persons seeing acts of cruelty and not reporting such acts should be brought to justice as well
6. Things must change to enhance oversight and restore confidence in humane handling and the safety of our food supply

Potential Transparent Solutions

Other models of animal care oversight are in place among other industries. Certain animals used in teaching and research fall under the purview of Animal Welfare Act, Public Health Service Guidelines, and various other Guidelines. The multitude of species and types of research and teaching make oversight of animals used in research and teaching difficult. One solution that has gained success is to provide independent third-party accreditation of animal care. The Association for the Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care International (AAALAC International) is recognized by the Public Health Service as an objective, third party that, through site visits and peer review, provides science-based oversight of internal processes. It is the internal processes on campuses and in research companies that actually provide the most effective oversight. The USDA provides legal and regulatory oversight while a third party (AAALAC International) assures all of us that the highest standards of animal care are in place. The meat industry could benefit from such double-headed oversight by both the USDA and a non-profit, independent third party such as American Humane. Such a collaborating third party would have to share the ultimate objective of using animal products and would have to be science-based.

Elements of a potentially successful collaboration between government (ex., USDA), a non-profit humane organization (ex., American Humane) and the meat industry would have to include:

- Development of a practical, working, relationship
- A science-based approach using stout sampling statistics aimed at detecting rare events of non-compliance
- A philosophy that includes:
 - Acceptance of animal product consumption
 - Agreement to trust, but verify
 - Agreement that that the goal is to prevent problems
 - Agreement that when problems arise, they be brought to rapid resolution
- Confidentiality of business practices
- Secure control of electronic data, including video images

- An agreement that plant operations would not stop as long as good faith efforts are underway to rapidly resolve animal welfare issues

Application of video surveillance in meat processing and slaughter plants American Humane², the USDA, and others have proposed video surveillance of meat processing plants in federally-inspected (and perhaps other) plants. Under one scheme, a central location would receive multiple video streams of data from remote plants. At this location, or another location, representatives of American Humane (for example) and USDA would review the data stream for non-compliance. Auditors certified by PAACO (www.animalauditor.org) would be present on site; but to reduce cost, only supervisory personnel would need to be PAACO certified. Issues that arise would be promptly brought to the attention of management at the plants and issues will be brought to rapid resolution. As long as the plants take rapid, effective action, USDA would not take punitive measures.

The technology is currently available to provide this level of oversight. Others can speak to the details of the technology cost. Furthermore, if automated data collection identifies non-compliance issues, then some of the human elements of fatigue and callousness would be removed.

From my perspective, if the measures of animal welfare are science-based, and if the sampling of human-animal interactions is at a high rate, and if a triad of industry-NGO-USDA provides oversight and confidential transparency, and with the industry taking the strongest stance to police itself, then we would have as high a level of oversight as is possible. Over time, science will improve our understanding of auditable points and we will be at the desired state of continuously improving farm animal welfare.

Attitude of the Meat Industry to video surveillance

The committee asked about the attitude of the Meat industry about the idea of video surveillance. I have spoken directly to key industry leaders and I have heard the following from more than one source:

- The industry expressed uniform repulsion about the inhumane events in California
- People readily admit that the system now in place does not work well because:
 - A low error rate (ex., 1%) is too high; that is, if 1% of the animals have a negative experience, this is an unacceptable rate

² American Humane is a non-profit, non-governmental organization with a long history of concern for the welfare of animals and children. Formed in 1877, American Humane has a history of collaboration with industry to improve animal welfare, including at slaughter. American Humane has a 131 year legacy of animal welfare, advocating reasonable practices related to animal transportation, slaughter practices, and they were an important supporter of the original Humane Methods of Slaughter Act. Today, AHA is lending its support to find science-based, practical solutions. AHA has been a partner with producers, the government, and industry to find viable, feasible solutions to problems.

- USDA and plants develop an adversarial rather than collaborative approach at some plants; this can cause new animal welfare problems (ex., when USDA shuts the plant down, animals in the flow to slaughter are left in a precarious situation and trucks in the yard back up which can cause serious issues during warm weather)
- USDA's only real authority is to "shut the plant down" – punishment does not foster collaboration
- Laws do not protect plants from infiltrators who directly cause welfare problems, then blame the plant
- Video surveillance was at first viewed negatively, but we have learned that several meat industry companies already use video surveillance for internal animal welfare (and other) audits; and now their view is less negative (and in some cases positive) towards third-party video audits of animal welfare
- I heard a strong sense that the industry would like to police itself and keep the government out of its business, as long as it acts responsibly
- Industry (and I) do not like animal handling and slaughter practices available to the general public who does not have the education and background to understand humane slaughter
- The industry and I agree that the government must be held accountable for their decisions which impact both economics and animal welfare (positively or negatively)
- Some industry groups have already installed video monitoring of animal handling for the following reasons:
 - To be able to perform more effective internal audits of welfare
 - To provide proof of humane handling
 - To keep the government out of their business so they can more effectively solve problems
 - To provide 'instant replay' when USDA oversight is either inadequate or overreacting to events
- Hallmark's early response to its humane issue was to install video monitoring in cooperation with a commercial company (Arrowsight) and others
- American Humane has consistently been a collaborative NGO that seeks genuine improvements in farm animal welfare;
- The industry is reaching out to reasonable NGOs, especially American Humane -- a sincere and collaborative humane organization

In conclusion, something must be done to restore consumer confidence through greater confidential transparency and oversight. Video surveillance has the potential to be a reasonably inexpensive way of providing the technical aspects of oversight. For the human aspects of oversight, the best approach in my view would be a healthy collaboration between an NGO such as American

Humane, professionally trained and certified auditors using a science-based approach, USDA and industry with the goal of zero tolerance for animal abuse and continuous improvement in animal welfare.