

Statement of Guillermo Gonzalez, Artisan Farmers Alliance

House Subcommittee on Livestock, Dairy and Poultry

Tuesday, May 8, 2007, at 10:00 a.m.

1300 Longworth House Office Building

Good morning Chairman Boswell, Ranking Member Hayes and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Guillermo Gonzalez. I am a farmer and the owner of Sonoma Foie Gras. I am here today on behalf of the Artisan Farmers Alliance, a new group that represents, among others, the three farms in the United States that produce foie gras. I thank the Committee for giving me this opportunity to set the record straight about our farming practices and to share with you the struggle of our three small farms to stay in business in the face of an aggressive assault by activists.

For those who are not familiar with foie gras, literally translated from French, foie gras means "fat liver." Foie gras dates back, at least, to ancient Egypt, where colorful relief paintings from almost 5,000 years ago depicted the hand feeding of waterfowl. This ancient farming practice spread throughout the Greek and, later, the Roman Empires. During the medieval period, Ashkenazi Jews kept the tradition alive. Goose meat served as an excellent source of nutrition, and the animal also provided cooking fat that conformed to Jewish law. It was the Ashkenazi Jewish population that brought foie gras to France, where the food became an integral part of French cooking.

As you may be able to tell from my accent, I am not French. I was born and raised in El Salvador. In the mid-1980s, I moved to France for a year to learn traditional foie gras farming techniques. In 1986, I moved to Sonoma County, California, and began to produce foie gras and other duck products. The rise in demand for foie gras was one small part of the movement in the 1980s toward more fresh, locally grown meat and produce. I operate a very small farm set in a walnut orchard southeast of Stockton, in California's great Central Valley. Last year, I raised 50,000 ducks. To put this in perspective, a modern poultry plant processes more birds in a single eight-hour shift than I do in an entire year.

On my farm, we still use very traditional methods. Once my ducklings are able to survive the elements, they are moved out of the barn and into the walnut orchard, where they are free to roam. At approximately 12 weeks, the ducks are brought inside where they are kept in collective pens for the final 17 days. During this last period, twice each day the birds are fed cooked corn using a smooth steel tube that deposits food in the pseudo crop sac. Each feeding takes from 5 to 10 seconds.

I am proud of my farm's operation. As anyone who has ever worked in animal agriculture will tell you, there is no one who cares more about animal welfare than farmers. Like others farmers, my entire livelihood depends on the health of my animals.

The age-old farming methods used in the production of foie gras have been extensively studied by scientists and veterinarians. The peer-reviewed scientific studies find that the

feeding does not create abnormal stress in the ducks. In each of the last two years, the American Veterinary Medical Association has reviewed the foie gras issue and rejected calls to label it inhumane. Last year, the AVMA sent a blue ribbon panel to review first hand the operations on a foie gras farm. Indeed, we regularly accommodate requests to visit our farms and see what we are doing.

While we farmers focus on the objective science, we are attacked on the basis of emotional appeals. Of course we understand that some people will choose not to eat our product, just as some people will choose not to eat beef or chicken or fish. That certainly is their right.

We, however, have been the subject of a sustained campaign to drive us out of business by huge, multi-million dollar organizations. Knowing they stand little chance against the large animal agriculture interests, the anti-meat activists have targeted the three small farms in the U.S. that produce foie gras. They have tried to ban the sale of our USDA inspected and approved products in many jurisdictions. They have filed countless lawsuits against us in an effort to drive us off of our land and out of business.

In many cases, activists have gone well beyond the law in their zeal to impose their views on others. My own farm and the two other U.S. foie gras farms, both in Upstate New York, have been broken into and vandalized repeatedly. They trespass, damage our property, steal our animals, and sometimes do much worse.

In 2002, I took my savings from years of farming and decided to open a restaurant in Sonoma, California. As the construction was in progress, animal activists broke into the restaurant, filled the drains with concrete, and turned on the water faucets. The restaurant was ruined. Perhaps even worse for me, a farmer who came from El Salvador to make a better life in the U.S., they spray-painted on the wall in large letters, "Go Home."

Bad as that was, I count myself lucky when compared to what they did to my business partner. Anti-meat activists stalked him and his family, including his child. Secretly, they videotaped him and his family in their daily routines. One day, the family found a wrapped package containing the tape in their front yard and a note saying, "We are watching you."

These stories highlight a disturbing trend. Acting in the name of "animal welfare," some seem to have forgotten the welfare of human farmers. Just like all others involved in agriculture, animal welfare is a primary concern for those of us in the Artisan Farmers Alliance. It is my hope that discussion of animal welfare can be based on science, fact, reason and experience rather than simply playing on human emotions. This is increasingly important as fewer and fewer Americans have a personal experience with agriculture. The truth is that food doesn't come from supermarkets. It comes from the hard work of farmers, and we ought to respect farmers for the hard work they do, not demonize them.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.