
May 31, 2008**EDITORIAL**

The Worst Way of Farming

In the past month, two new reports have examined how farm animals are raised in this country. The report funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts calls the prevailing system “industrial farm animal production.” The report from the Union of Concerned Scientists prefers the term “confined animal feeding operations.”

No matter what you call it, it adds up to the same thing. Millions of animals are crowded together in inhumane conditions, causing significant environmental threats and unacceptable health risks for workers, their neighbors and all the rest of us.

The astonishing increase in the number and size of confined animal operations has been spawned largely by the very structure of American farm supports, which always has been skewed in a way that concentrates farming in fewer and fewer hands. As both of these reports make clear, the so-called efficiency of industrial animal production is an illusion, made possible by cheap grain, cheap water and prisonlike confinement systems.

In short, animal husbandry has been turned into animal abuse. Manure — traditionally a source of fertilizer — has been turned into toxic waste that fouls the air and adjacent water bodies. Crowding creates health problems, resulting in the chronic overuse of antibiotics.

And, because the modest profits in confinement operations require the lowest possible labor costs, including automated feeding, watering and manure-handling systems, these operations have helped empty and impoverish rural America.

The Pew report recommends new laws regulating pollution from industrial farms as rigorously as pollution from other industries, a phasing-out of confinement systems that restricts “natural movement and normal behavior,” a ban on antibiotics used only to promote animal growth and the application of antitrust laws to encourage more competition and less concentration.

These are all useful guideposts for the next Congress and a new administration.

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