

Factory Farming: What It Is and Why It's a Problem

Dec 01, 2020, Share *(Many impacting pictures in this article which somehow wouldn't transfer)*

<https://thehumaneleague.org/article/what-is-factory-farming>

Factory farms are disastrous for the environment, nearby communities, consumer health, and animal welfare.



Photo: Andrew Skowron

Factory farming is the primary way that the United States and many other countries produce popular animal products like hamburgers, cheese, and eggs. But it's far from a flawless process. Factory farming causes significant damage to rural communities,

surrounding environments, and the farmed animals themselves. Today, advocates from a broad range of backgrounds are increasingly calling for a shift away from these harsh industrial practices to give rise to a more just, equitable food system.

This article will explore what factory farming is, what life on a factory farm is like for animals, and why major changes within this industry must be implemented.

What is factory farming?

Factory farms, also known as concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), are a modern industrial method of raising farmed animals, who are collectively known in industry parlance as livestock. At its core, factory farming is a form of [intensive agriculture](#) designed to maximize profits using as few resources as possible. On factory farms, large numbers of animals are confined in small spaces, which often means keeping animals indoors for the duration of their lives.

Factory farming is an increasingly common way to raise animals for food, focusing on species such as cows, pigs, chickens, and fish. CAFOs can also be used to farm animals for non-food purposes, such as minks farmed intensively for their [fur](#).

What happens on factory farms?

On factory farms, animals are not given any choice about how to live their lives. They're raised to grow quickly so that they can be turned into products as swiftly as possible. Various bodily mutilations, extremely tight and crowded confinement, and lives spent entirely indoors are routine aspects of life for factory-farmed animals.

Inhumane treatment

Inhumane treatment occurs on factory farms wherever animal cruelty is ignored, though definitions of cruelty vary widely between stakeholders. For example, definitions of animal cruelty used by the CEOs of big meat companies will differ drastically from those used

by grassroots animal advocates. While producers often claim to root out inhumane treatment of farmed animals wherever possible, many advocates believe that factory farms are inherently inhumane.

When routine factory farming practices are taken into consideration, such as separating mother cows from infants, which often results in mothers crying for days; castrating male animals without anesthetics; or never once allowing animals to experience the outdoors—save for a terrifying journey in the back of a truck on the way to the slaughterhouse—there is little about the experience of farmed animals in the factory farming system that appears to be humane.

Chickens are debeaked

Chickens' beaks are a vital part of their physiology. The way humans use our hands to explore our environment, chickens use their beaks, pecking at food and other objects [14,000 to 15,000 times](#) each day. In factory farms, this behavior can take an ugly turn. When chickens are faced with certain conditions—like overcrowding (which prevents them from exploring their surroundings), boredom, and other hallmarks of CAFOs—they often turn this pecking behavior onto fellow chickens, resulting in injury, cannibalism, and even death.



Rather than provide chickens with more freedom and space to help eliminate damaging pecking and cannibalism, many companies instead cut off parts of the chickens' beaks. Using a machine equipped with a hot blade, which in some operations can debeak as many as 15 chickens per minute, top beaks are cut either by half or two-thirds, while the bottom beak is trimmed by a quarter of its length. There is [evidence](#) that debeaking causes pain to chickens not only during the cutting but chronically throughout their lives.

Wild chickens, or those kept in non-intensive farming conditions, do not become cannibalistic or need their beaks trimmed to properly socialize with one another. Factory farming practices give rise to these abnormal behaviors.

Cows and pigs are tail-docked

Animals on factory farms, such as cows, pigs, and sheep, routinely have their tails removed—a process known as tail-docking. These procedures are generally carried out without anesthetics and are [banned](#) in certain regions because of the long-term pain they are believed to cause farmed animals.

Tail-docking is done for a number of reasons. In pigs, much like chickens, the stressful, unnatural conditions on factory farms drive the animals to bite one another's tails, causing injuries and sometimes infections. Tail-docking is designed to remove the tuft of hair at the end of the tail that can lure other pigs to bite. The practice is also designed to cause [pain](#) on the pig's tail so that they more actively avoid being bitten.

In cows, tail-docking is performed to make milking easier and more comfortable for workers. The dairy industry reports purported benefits for cows in terms of improved hygiene, but some studies [refute](#) these claims. Tail-docking is prohibited in several European countries, but many North American countries have yet to ban the practice.

Animals are confined

Extreme confinement is the defining feature of factory farms. It causes boredom, frustration, stress, and other serious welfare concerns for farmed animals. The most intensive confinement system for cows is called a tie stall and is used on dairy cows. Each cow spends all her time tied into a single stall, followed by a loose stall in which cows are allowed to roam around a small shed. Still, these cows spend their whole lives indoors.

One study [found](#) that confinement of any sort, when compared with raising cows in a pasture, negatively affects welfare in many respects. Many chickens raised for meat—known as broiler chickens—are kept in battery cages, with roughly the same amount of space as a piece of lined paper. Female pigs used for breeding are held in gestation crates so small that they cannot turn around for the duration of their lives.

Genetic manipulation

Genetic manipulation in factory farms can take many forms. Factory-farmed animals can be bred to possess certain traits; for example, broiler chickens are often designed to grow bigger breasts, since breast meat is a favorite among consumers. This added body weight is unnatural for the birds and causes a host of debilitating medical conditions as the birds age.

Genetic manipulation can also lead to worsening conditions for animals. Cows are often grown without horns, enabling more cows to be packed into smaller areas. While this may increase farm outputs, it detracts from animal welfare.

Genetic modification carries risks to both human and animal health. Over time, acquiring such desired traits in farmed animals can lead to each individual becoming nearly genetically identical, which [augments](#) the already-high pandemic risk inside CAFOs. Under normal circumstances, individual genetic variations act as speed bumps on the road to viral transmission. Large numbers of genetically identical animals allow viruses to spread much faster and potentially become more virulent.

Why does this still happen?

There are many reasons that factory farming remains the [dominant](#) method for raising animals for food in the United States. The animal agriculture industry wields serious financial and political clout, allowing the industry's harmful effects on human health and the environment to go [largely unregulated](#). The conditions on factory farms also remain obscured, thanks to ag-gag laws and other legislation.

Public perception of farmed animals plays a role in the proliferation of factory farms as well, since animals are generally not viewed as deserving a life beyond their exploitation by humans. These beliefs are often cultural and at times can be attributed to a lack of understanding regarding animals' [proven](#) sentience or abilities to experience pain and negative psychological effects from captivity. In recent years, public understanding of animal sentience is thought

to be [changing](#) in some countries, arriving at a point that is in greater alignment with science.

The two biggest factors behind the continuation—and [dramatic increase](#)—of factory farming in the US and around the world are the rise in global meat consumption and the growing demand for cheap meat. Countries like the US, Brazil, and China help meet this demand by generating a surplus of animal products, which can be exported abroad. There is big money and political power behind industrial animal agriculture pushing to keep welfare standards low, governmental subsidies high, and consumer demand soaring.

Why is factory farming bad?

Factory farming is bad for the environment, the communities near these facilities, consumer health, and animal welfare. Below are a few key issues surrounding factory farming.

Animal welfare

Animal welfare philosophy and legislation are grounded by the Five Freedoms, a framework denoting the kind of living conditions animals should not be subjected to. [The Five Freedoms](#) are:

1. Freedom from thirst, hunger, and malnutrition
2. Freedom from discomfort and exposure
3. Freedom from pain, injury, and disease
4. Freedom from fear and distress
5. Freedom to express normal behavior

The conditions on a typical factory farm make it impossible for animals to fully achieve even one of these freedoms. Harsh confinement, such as battery cages and gestation crates, makes it impossible for animals to express their full repertoire of natural behaviors. It is also notoriously difficult to discern whether a farm animal is experiencing fear, since this would require the close monitoring of every animal in an attempt to monitor their affective emotional state. The routine mutilations of debeaking, tail-docking,

and other procedures are all injuries that can cause chronic pain, and they often go unmonitored.

While some factory farms have made attempts to improve welfare or align with the Five Freedoms, they largely—and arguably always—come up short.

Environmental impact

Raising animals for food is a resource-intensive activity. Animals require water, medications, climate controls that often rely on fossil fuel energy sources, and shelter. Food is among the biggest resources required. Vast swaths of land must be planted with mono-crops such as corn and soy to feed animals. In the Amazon rainforest, crops for animal feed are among the [primary drivers](#) of deforestation.

Pollution from factory farms is another huge issue, contaminating the air, land, and water around facilities. According to a [report](#) from Food and Water Watch, a single hog produces around one and a half tons of manure every year, and all the hog farms in the US produce a total of about 167 million pounds of waste—equivalent to the waste produced by half the country's human population. Hog waste is particularly dangerous since it is generally not treated before being released into the environment, leading to surface and groundwater contamination.

Human health issues

Human health can be negatively affected by factory farms. Environmental pollution disproportionately affects lower-income, minority communities who live next to or near factory farms. The Food and Water Watch report details air pollution from broiler farms, since chicken manure contains toxins such as ammonia, which causes respiratory irritation and is linked to lung disease. Environmental pollution from factory farms is what drives these businesses into lower-income communities in the first place. Factory farms operate off of the assumption that people in these

places will put up less of a fight than more affluent, white-dominated areas. This is an example of [environmental racism](#).

Human health is further affected by factory farms through the bacterial contamination of meat, such as salmonella and E. coli, both of which are caused by fecal contamination and are [extremely common](#) in chicken meat.

Antibiotic resistance is another looming health threat. Animals are often given antibiotics throughout their lives as a preventative measure against illness. However, these drugs are often applied liberally, killing most of the bacteria but allowing small, drug-resistant “superbugs” to survive and multiply. Trace amounts of these bacteria may be eaten directly by consumers of factory-farmed products, causing severe, sometimes incurable illness. The United Nations [estimates](#) antibiotic resistance could kill 10 million people and force 24 million people into extreme poverty by 2050.

Rural communities

Many rural communities in the United States trace their origins to small farms, composed of an interdependent economic ecosystem of small farms and businesses that support them. But small farms have difficulty competing with CAFOs, since smaller operations generally cannot deliver products to match the low prices and high volumes that factory farms are able to achieve—especially when CAFOs produce a surplus of product, resulting in artificially lowered prices and driving small farms out of business.

As a result, across America the number of farms has dramatically decreased since the onset of factory farming in the early 1960s, while the number of animals at remaining farms has increased steadily. The closing of small farms often affects other businesses that provide farm equipment, feed, or services (such as restaurants and movie theaters) to rural communities. Factory farms also provide fewer jobs than smaller farms, given the high degree of mechanization that allows fewer people to manage more animals. These compounding factors can lead communities to become hollowed out and all but collapsed because of factory farms.

Workers in factory farms tend to live in rural, lower-income communities composed of people of color who often come from immigrant backgrounds and can be undocumented. Meatpacking plants—where animals are killed and processed—are among the country’s most dangerous workplaces, causing a large number of injuries while providing little pay or adequate health benefits. Farmworkers also tend to be among the [least unionized](#) in the country.

During the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, workers at meatpacking plants were [forced](#) to continue showing up for work, since their jobs were deemed “essential” by the federal government. As a result, thousands of people lost their lives and likely brought the infection home to their families and communities. Factory farms do little to mitigate these and other health risks for workers, or for the communities they call home.

How are animals killed on factory farms?

The federal Humane Slaughter Act is supposed to ensure that animals are rendered unconscious before they are bled out or dismembered. However, these regulations are not readily enforced by USDA. The agency often defers to the factory farming industry to regulate itself.

Even at the best of times, a trip to the slaughterhouse can mean more than a quick and painless death. Some chickens are forced to endure [live-shackle slaughter](#), where their legs are jammed into metal clamps and hung upside down, often resulting in broken bones. A conveyor belt carries them toward an electrified bath of water, where their heads are dunked. The bath is supposed to stun them; however, many birds avoid this bath or are not properly stunned and remain conscious for the slaughter, when their throats are slit and their abused bodies thrown into scalding hot water meant to de-feather them. This is perhaps the single greatest cause of animal suffering in slaughterhouses.

Cattle are commonly killed using a stun-gun (or stunner), which is essentially a gun with a retractable bolt instead of a bullet. This bolt

is fired into the brain between the eyes of a cow, rendering them braindead.

Pigs can be electrocuted with an apparatus applied to their temples.

Where is factory farming most common?

The US invented the factory farm, so it's not surprising that the country relies on factory farming for virtually all animal products. The [2020 report by Food & Water Watch](#) found dense livestock concentrations in the following states (and others), about half of which are in the Midwest:

- Alabama
- Arkansas
- California
- Delaware
- Illinois
- Indiana
- Iowa
- Kansas
- Maryland
- Michigan
- Minnesota
- Mississippi
- Missouri
- Nebraska
- New York
- North Carolina
- Ohio
- Wisconsin

Factory farming facts and statistics

There is a lot to learn about factory farming, and given the sheer size of this growing industry, the numbers are often difficult to fathom. Below are a few facts and statistics that form a brief snapshot of intensive animal agriculture.

- Factory farming is driving the consolidation of farms in the United States. The total number of farms in the US [decreased](#) by 50 percent between 1960 and 2002, while the total number of farmed animals skyrocketed.
- As of 2020, there are roughly [1.6 billion animals](#) confined within the 25,000 factory farms spread across the United States.
- Roughly 99 percent of animals in the US are [raised](#) on factory farms.
- A single broiler chicken factory farm can produce about [500,000 birds](#) every year.

How can we stop factory farming?

There are many actions you can take to help put a stop to factory farming. Here are a few ways you can connect with The Humane League to end the abuse of animals raised for food:

- [Join the Fast Action Network \(FAN\)](#)
- [Volunteer with us](#)
- [Learn more about our campaigns](#)

No matter where you live or what skills you bring to the table, everyone is welcome to join the fight for a more just food system.

Conclusion

Factory farming has many downsides for humans, animals, and the environment. The practice is perpetuated by multinational corporations and backed in large part by world governments and the political establishment. A food system without factory farms—which would be far more equitable and just, and far less damaging to people, animals, and the environment—is long overdue.

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[Amanda Waxman, Nov 10, 2020](#)



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