

CAFO Horror Story – Cruel Killing of Massive Number of Animals

One of the most horrible consequences of the intensive confinement of huge numbers of animals in CAFOs is their increased vulnerability to the spread of disease. For decades the industry has attempted to counteract this problem with antibiotics, but antibiotics don't work on viruses. If a single animal in a barn crowded with near identical animals becomes infected, the disease will spread like wildfire. Before this happens, operators will usually kill them all to prevent spread to other barns. The process is called "culling" and usually employs techniques that cause severe suffering.

An outbreak of bird flu in 2014 and lasting through 2015 led to the culling of 50 million poultry in the US.¹ As of June 23, 2023, a new bird flu outbreak that began in early 2022 has led to the mass culling of almost 59 million animals in 571 "backyard" flocks and in 325 of what the USDA calls commercial flocks, the latter being almost all CAFOs. While backyard flocks may involve a few hundred birds, many CAFOs house hundreds of thousands to millions of birds. Just in March of 2022 some 5.3 million egg-laying hens were culled at a site in Buena Vista County, Iowa, 5 million in Osceola Co., Iowa and 2.75 million in Jefferson Co., Wisconsin. So far, 20 sites have each culled over one million hens. Another 34 sites have each culled over 100,000 hens, turkeys or broiler chickens.²

In the Osceola Co. case, *The Guardian* reported that the hens were killed using a system called "ventilation shutdown plus" (VSD+) in which air is closed off to the barns and heat pumped in until the temperature reaches at least 104 deg. F. *The Guardian* quoted one worker involved in the culling as saying, "They cooked those birds alive."³ VOX noted that during the 2014-2015 bird flu outbreak, the culling method included spraying animals with suffocating foam or gassing birds with carbon dioxide in small enclosures.⁴ *The Intercept* reported that the VSD+ technique was used in 2020 by a large producer in Iowa to kill healthy pigs who could not be shipped to slaughter due to Covid-induced slaughterhouse closures. One study estimated that it would require two hours for hens in battery cages in large egg-laying CAFOs to die under VSD+.⁵

The federal government compensates producers for the killing of these animals and the clean-up afterwards.⁶ Thus these horrifically cruel processes, the direct consequence of a fundamentally flawed CAFO industry model, implicate US taxpayers who have no say in the matter.

References:

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3. “US egg factory roasts alive 5.3m chickens in avian flu cull – then fires almost every worker”, The Guardian, April 28, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2022/apr/28/egg-factory-avian-flu-chickens-culled-workers-fired-iowa>

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