CAFOs - Factory Farming

On a CAFO, "factory farming" is the way farm animals are raised for meat, dairy and eggs. Ain't that a bunch o' poo!

THE CAFOs OF MEATOPOLIS — WHAT AN (ANIMAL) WASTE
CAFO - Factory Farming Animals on an Industrial Scale

A few decades back, when our Uncle Dogie was among the last of the old-style wranglers, we remember Aunt Windy always yelling about keeping the spurs off the coffee table and that there wasn't enough Pledge in the world to take care of all that trail dust.

Dubious memories of ranching relatives aside, most of us are only vaguely aware of what goes on to raise farm animals today. The process resides mostly in "CAFOs"—Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, which are "factory farms" designed to raise animals for meat, eggs, and dairy in ways that are most efficient and yield the best profit margin. Unfortunately, not all is superlative in CAFO operations.

In today's guest article, David Kirby, author of Animal Factory, describes some of the problems with CAFOs and factory farming.

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The Threat of Industrial Animal Farms to Humans and the Environment
by David Kirby

Many Americans have no idea where their food comes from, and many have no desire to find out. That is unfortunate.

Every bite we take has had some impact on the natural environment, somewhere in the world. As the planet grows more crowded, and more farmers turn to industrialized methods to feed millions of new mouths, that impact will only worsen.

The willful ignorance of our own food's provenance is curious, given our Discovery Channel-like fascination with the way in which everything else in our modern world is made. Some consumers will spend hours online reading up on cars, cosmetics, or clothes, searching out the most meticulously crafted or environmentally healthy products they can find, then run down to the supermarket and load their carts with bacon, butter, chicken, and eggs without thinking for a second where—or how—any of those goods were produced.

This is starting to change, of course. More Americans are coming to realize that the modern production of food—especially to provide for our affluent, protein-rich diet—has a direct and sometimes negative impact on the environment, the well-being of animals, rural communities, and human health itself. Some have joined in a contemporary consumer revolt of sorts that has put the corporate food industry on the defensive in recent years.

Factory Farms — Mega-Meat Operations

At the center of the storm are the large-scale, mechanized megafarms where hundreds of thousands of cows, pigs, chickens, and turkeys are fed and fattened for market, all within the confines of enclosed buildings or crowded outdoor lots.

Government and industry call these massive compounds "confined [or concentrated] animal feeding operations," or CAFOs (usually pronounced KAYfohs), though most people know them simply as "factory farms." Chances are you have seen them from above while flying in an airplane:
long white buildings lined up in tightly packed rows of three, four, or many more.

CAFOs are where most of our animal protein—our milk, cheese, butter, yogurt, eggs, chicken, turkey, bacon, sausage, cold cuts, ribs, pork chops, and, increasingly, beef and fish—comes from these days. Old MacDonald's farm—with his big red barn and clucking chickens in the yard—is quickly fading away into a romanticized past. Today, MacDonald would most likely be working as a contract grower for some conglomerate, raising tens of thousands of animals inside giant enclosures according to strict instructions dictated by the company, which typically owns the livestock but is not responsible for the thousands of tons of waste left behind before the survivors are trucked off to slaughter.

Large companies with kitchen-table names like Perdue, Tyson, Smithfield, Cargill, ADM, and Land O'Lakes now control much of the poultry and livestock production in the United States. They own the animals, they control the all-important processing and packing plants, they often operate their own distribution networks, and they sell an array of brands to consumers in the supermarket.

This "vertical integration" model of production—some would call it an old-fashioned, illegal trust in need of a Teddy Roosevelt-style trustbuster—leaves small and independent growers at such an obvious disadvantage that many of them give up animal agriculture altogether. Two percent of US livestock facilities now raise 40 percent of all animals, [1] and the vast majority of pigs, chickens, and dairy cows are produced inside animal factories. [2]

Livestock and poultry are very big business in America. Like all industries, agribusiness has barons that wield extraordinary political and economic clout, with billions at their disposal to spend on lobbying, local and national political campaigns, saturation advertising, feel-good PR (see: "California, happy cows"), and other means of creating a favorable business climate for themselves.

**CAFO Problems**

Like many big industries, factory farms are major contributors to air, water, and land pollution. Science and government have concluded without a doubt that CAFOs are responsible for discharging millions of tons of contaminants from animal manure into the environment every year—much of it illegally.

Unlike the steel, auto, or coal industries, livestock operations are not subject to the same stringent regulations, laws, and controls on environmental discharges. After all, what could be more important than the guarantee of an abundant, safe, and affordable food supply? What could be more sacrosanct in American legend and law than the farms and farmers who make sure our food gets to the national dinner table night after night?

Besides, how could a farm be considered a factory? There are no smokestacks on a farm. There are no chemical plants or refineries, and very few vehicles. Where, then, is all that supposed pollution coming from, and how much of a problem could there actually be?

Consider this:

- Each year, the United States produces more than one ton of "dry matter"—the portion of animal waste remaining after the water is removed—for every resident, [3] and animal feeding operations yield one hundred times more waste than all US human sewage treatment plants. [4]

- While human sewage is treated to kill pathogens, animal waste is not. Hog manure has ten to one hundred times more concentrated pathogens than human waste, [5] yet the law would never permit untreated human waste to be kept in vast "lagoons," or sprayed onto fields, as is the case with manure.

- Manure can contain pathogens, antibiotics, drug-resistant bacteria, hormones, heavy metals, and other compounds that can seriously impact human health, aquatic life, and wildlife when introduced into the environment, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

- The eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay produces one million tons of manure a year, enough to fill a football stadium to the top
Agricultural waste is the number-one form of well-water contamination in the United States, where at least 4.5 million people are exposed to dangerously high nitrate levels in their drinking water.

A Centers for Disease Control study of well water in nine Midwestern states showed that 13 percent of the supply had nitrate levels above the EPA standard of ten milligrams per liter.

Feedlot odors contain some 170 separate chemicals, many of them known to cause respiratory ailments, diarrhea, depression, violent behavior, and other health problems.

Rearing cattle produces more greenhouse gases than cars, a UN report warns.

Animal-factory proponents say that CAFOs are the most cost-effective method in the world of producing meat, milk, and eggs. They credit modern American agriculture with yielding the cheapest food in human history—which is hard to refute—and also the safest, which is debatable.

CAFO Counterattack Doesn’t Pass the Smell Test

Animal industrialists say that by confining poultry and livestock to CAFOs—as opposed to letting them roam free on ranges, pastures, and fields—they are providing warm and clean environments where farm animals can thrive, free from the threats of the elements, predators, or even attacks from other farm animals. The delivery of food, water, and veterinary care becomes more efficient, they contend, and animals can be moved more quickly to market, increasing profitability.

Besides, according to these industrialists, consumers demand cheap, lean, uniform cuts of meat, and using CAFOs is the only possible way to deliver that.

But animal-factory opponents, whose ranks are growing—they are not only consumers, but scientists, politicians, and farmers, as well—charge that the only way CAFO production can be profitable is by passing along, or "externalizing," certain costs associated with raising so many animals in such a small place.

In 2008, the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production released a landmark report on CAFOs. It reached some very sobering conclusions about their impact on our health, the environment, rural communities, farm workers, food safety, animal welfare, and the looming threat of evolving microbes—including antibiotic-resistant E. coli, MRSA, and, of course, swine flu virus.

The Pew report reminds us that the price of protein, given the externalities of animal-factory production, often goes well beyond the price tag in your grocer’s aisle:

“*These 'externalities' may include anything from changes in property values near industrial farming operations, to health costs from polluted air, water, and soil, and spreading resistant infections or diseases of animal origin, to environmental damages caused by CAFOs, to the public suffering of industrial farming practices.*
degradation or cleanup costs—all of which are ‘paid’ by the public, even though they are not included in the cost of producing or buying the meat, poultry, eggs, and milk that modern industrial animal agriculture provides.” [11 ]

My book is not strictly anti-CAFO, nor do I call for an end to industrial animal production. Informed consumers—whether of food or of information—are vital to a healthy democracy. I would never dream of telling people what to eat or, more important, what not to eat. But we all have a responsibility, even an ethical obligation, to know where our food comes from, and what impact its production has on the environment and public health, before we take it home and fry it up in a pan.

Wherever possible, I have tried to include in my work voices from the animal-production industry and other CAFO supporters. Many farmers believe that industrial animal production is the only option open to them if they are to remain in farming, and they are grateful to the large companies for providing steady contracts and a stable economic environment for them to survive.

One powerful argument for agribusiness is that it offers a lower retail price of food to shoppers. For consumers, factory-farmed meat, milk, and eggs are usually considerably more affordable than their organic, free-range, or “sustainably produced” counterparts. Most working families do not have the luxury of buying high-end, "boutique" protein. Some opponents of CAFOs would counter that families should simply cut down on the animal products they buy.

I am not a vegetarian, and you will occasionally find me in line for fast food, so I have no business telling others how to eat. Food—like sex, politics, and religion—is an intensely personal, emotional, and complicated subject.

Moreover, farmers are not evil people. The farmers I got to know, including those who operate CAFOs, seemed to genuinely care about the environment, the animals, their communities, and the quality and safety of the food they produced.

On the other hand, I cannot dismiss or forget what I witnessed firsthand in my three years of reporting this story. I met with people living within smelling distance of animal factories in the chicken belts of Arkansas, Oklahoma, Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia; in the hog belt of North Carolina; in the upper Midwestern CAFO states of Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio; and in the arid western dairy regions of Texas, central California, and the Yakima Valley of Washington.

Everywhere I went, the story was the same: CAFOs had fouled the air, spoiled the water, threatened property values, changed the face of local agriculture, and made life miserable for thousands of people, though certainly not everybody.

Wrap-Up

Animal factories of every stripe are currently under fire. So what does that mean for the future of CAFOs? Will they be reformed into universal acceptability? Will they be litigated into oblivion? Will they be driven out of the country? The truth is, none of those things is likely.

Only time will tell how this dramatic saga plays out. But humankind may not have the last word on whether CAFOs will be with us in twenty years. That decision will belong to nature. And nature did not intend for animals to live by the hundreds or thousands, crammed together inside buildings, raised with pharmaceutical products, with no access to grass, sunlight, or the clean, healthy scent of outdoor air.
**Animal Factory**

by David Kirby

Our highly industrialized “factory farms” raise food animals in a way that “externalizes” many of the costs of production—that is, the costs are quietly passed on to consumers, taxpayers, and surrounding communities. Examples include: streams and public water supplies contaminated with manure waste; neighborhoods ruined by the smell of hog-waste lagoons; food recalls and flu outbreaks caused by farm pathogens; “dead zones” in our coastal waters, some the size of entire states.

*Animal Factory* follows three American families in different regions of the US whose lives have been utterly changed by Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, a.k.a. CAFOs. Weaving science, politics, business, and the lives of everyday people, David Kirby documents a crisis that has reached a critical juncture in the history of human health, animal welfare, and our environment.

**REFERENCES:**


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**Food, Inc.**  A Participant Guide: How Industrial Food is Making Us Sicker, Fatter, and Poorer—and What You Can Do About It
(Karl Weber, editor)

Through a series of essays by leading experts and thinkers, this book answers questions such as ... Where does my food come from and how is it processed? What stake do giant agribusinesses have in maintaining the status quo of food production and consumption? How can I feed my family healthy foods affordably? The companion to the powerful documentary *Food, Inc.*, this book adds depth to the discussion of the issues.

**Eating Animals**  (by Jonathan Safran Foer)

Jonathan Safran Foer spent much of his teenage and college years oscillating between omnivore and vegetarian. But on the brink of fatherhood—facing the prospect of having to make dietary choices on a child's behalf—his casual questioning took on urgency. His quest for answers ultimately required him to visit factory farms in the middle of the night, dissect the emotional ingredients of meals from his childhood, and probe some of his most primal instincts about right and wrong. *Eating Animals* explores the many fictions we use to justify our eating habits.

**Manifestos on the Future of Food and Seed**

*Manifestos on the Future of Food and Seed* is a collection of essays that goes to the heart of our existence—what we eat and how we grow it. We live in a world with 80,000 edible plants, but only about 150 are cultivated; a world of agricultural abundance and rampant obesity, yet 800 million still suffer from malnutrition; a world where food is modified to travel long distances rather than to be nutritious and flavorful. *Manifestos* offers prescriptions to reverse perhaps the worst food crisis faced in human history.
(edited by Vandana Shiva)

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A concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO), as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), is an animal feeding operation (AFO) in which over 1000 animal units are confined for over 45 days a year. An animal unit is the equivalent of 1000 pounds of "live" animal weight. A thousand animal units equates to 1000 cows, 700 cows used for dairy purposes, 2500 pigs weighing more than 55 lbs, 125 thousand chickens, or 82 thousand egg laying hens or pullets.