

# Benefits of factory farms just illusions

If they updated the movie, Dorothy wouldn't live on Uncle Henry and Auntie Em's farm. The tornado would blow her away from a corporately owned concentrated animal feeding operation.

I'm guessing she'd settle down in Oz instead of going back.

Unlike the old American family farm, there is nothing particularly cozy about the way most meat, dairy products and eggs are produced these days.

Farmers used to be decentralized and independent. There were lots of them and they all produced a variety of agricultural products. Now, a few big players use concentrated, factory-inspired techniques to produce a single product measured in animal units.

Calling them animal units instead of animals sounds efficient and modern. Treating them like units instead of sentient creatures raises moral questions.

Presented with photos of pitiful baby calves that are immobilized during short, grim lives for the sake of producing tender veal, a lot of people cringe. In Arizona, voters banned crates to confine calves and pregnant sows.

But the system goes on.

To paraphrase Uncle Henry: "We can't go against the law of free enterprise, Dorothy."

Or so we are told.

Modern farming methods are more efficient. That, we are told, is what matters.

Yet evidence has been mounting for years about the problems that result from factory farming. There's the evolution of drug-resistant strains of bacteria as the result of overusing antibiotics on animals that are prone to disease when kept in close confinement. There is the vast amount of animal waste produced in these huge operations.

Most people didn't know about the nauseating practice of using cattle brains and spinal tissue in feed for other cows until the practice was banned in an effort to curb the spread of mad cow disease.

It raised nagging questions about the philosophical underpinnings of factory farming that went beyond mad-cow disease. Cows were never meant to be cannibals. Animals were never meant to be units on a production line. At what point does this quest for efficiency undermine our moral authority as stewards of the planet?

Food is something sacred. We gather over it during family celebrations. We pray before we eat it.

An animal raised with respect for its needs and inherent qualities, and then humanely slaughtered, fits the image of food we bless for the health it gives our body.

But what about animals treated with contempt? Earlier this year, an undercover operation by the Human Society of the United States resulted in footage of downer cows being prodded, beaten or hauled by forklift to slaughter in apparent violation of the law.

A downer cow, one that falls and can't get up, is more likely to have mad-cow disease. But it wasn't just the risk of disease that made this so troubling. Forget sentimentality. The lack of respect and compassion for these living creatures suggested a spiritual deficit. If we are what we eat, what does this make us?

Efficient? Cost-effective? Modern?

A new report suggests even that is an illusion. A team of researchers from the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, did a 2½-year study that found factory farming is only an economic success story if you fail to consider the full costs to public health, the environment and rural communities.

"Farmers relinquished their once-autonomous, animal husbandry decision-making authority in exchange for contracts that provide assured payment, but require substantial capital investment," they wrote. "Such contracts make it nearly impossible for there to be open and competitive markets for most hog and poultry producers."

They wrote that "while we are raising approximately the same number of swine as we did in 1950, for example, we are doing so on significantly fewer, far larger farms, with dramatically fewer farm workers." Corporate ownership draws investment and wealth away from rural communities where the farms are located, they said.

Other things stay in those communities.

Like huge amounts of waste.

The researchers found that more than a million people use groundwater that shows moderate or severe contamination caused, in part, by this animal waste. Runoff from these operations carries antibiotics and hormones, pesticides and heavy metals.

Air pollution from ammonia, hydrogen sulfide and methane gases can cause respiratory problems for nearby residents, and increased higher rates of neurobehavioral and neuropsychiatric abnormalities have also been documented, researchers say.

The list of problems goes on (find the report, "Putting Meat on the Table: Industrial Farm Animal Production in America," at [www.ncifap.org](http://www.ncifap.org)).

The costs of factory farming are high.

If we can't go back to Uncle Henry's farm, maybe we can move forward to a new system of smaller farms that are based on sustainability and diversity. Like Dorothy's quest to go home to Kansas, the difficulties might be more a matter of perception than reality.

And the wizards who insist we have to continue elevating efficiency above all else may just be men blowing smoke.

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