Four Legs Good, Two Legs Bad: How Slaughterhouse Safety Hasn’t Kept Up With the Times

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Four Legs Good, Two Legs Bad: How Slaughterhouse Safety Hasn't Kept Up With the Times

On a small farm in upstate New York, there are cows wandering free through green grass under blue skies. Farmers come out to the pasture daily to talk with the animals and spend time caring for them. They are the quintessential ideal of organic, happy beef.

Then those few cows are loaded up into a beat-up pickup truck. This isn’t a joy ride you’d hear in a twangy country song, these cows are headed for the slaughterhouse. The scene is bereft of the activism of Animal Farm, or the symbolism in Charlotte’s Web. There’s no nursery rhymes, no spoonful of sugar; these cows are shipping off to be hacked to pieces by someone who didn’t raise them.

Michael Underwood, a purveyor at Sunfed Farms in Schenectady NY, talks about this process with tears in his eyes. Underwood, 28, shows up multiple times a week to the Union Square Greenmarket to sell- and educate customers about- beef from Sunfed Farms. He has a degree in music theory, which he abandoned to focus on ethical beef slaughtering. His reasoning is that he plays music sometimes, but he’s always eating; we are all always eating. And according to Underwood, we should care more.

“I have no idea how mass-produced ‘organic’ beef is actually, you know, okay,” he said. For Underwood, the concern isn’t for the people that come to the Union Square Greenmarket every week. It’s about mass production. “It’s so easy for people to go buy that two dollar beef and believe like, ok, but really; think about how much you are sacrificing to save a few dollars.” For farmers and associates like Sunfed Beef and company, large-scale beef slaughtering is a worst-case scenario for consumers. “It’s terrifying. I’m really scared of our future if we keep eating this way,” said Underwood.

One of those fears is sickness. It is impossible to detect and kill all dangerous strains of e.coli, the most common pathogen that makes consumers sick from beef. Every single cow has e.coli naturally present in their gut bacteria, according to Dr. Michael J. Baker, a Beef Cattle Extension Specialist at Cornell University. But it’s not dangerous or injurious to them, like it is to humans. E.coli contamination happens during slaughter if the bowel is improperly perforated or severed during the slaughter process. But even then, it’s undetectable. At least 20 percent of all beef recalls in 2016 were due to e.coli contamination.

The flurry of symptoms associated with bad food can make the toughest stomach turn. They range from a stomach ache with a fever, to death. It’s hard to forget the stomach-churning symptoms of eating something that’s contaminated with salmonella or e.coli. From legal loopholes and outdated rules to undetectable infections and understaffing, the United States Department of Agriculture may not be doing all it can to make sure the American public’s health isn’t in the toilets.
A dozen of USDA inspectors – though most of them did not want to talk at length – in addition to top academics, researchers, butchers, and policymakers all voice similar concerns. They described a US meat industry that has not kept up with the times, which puts millions of consumers a year at risk of foodborne illness. They’re giving us warning signs that we could be on the verge of catastrophe. They say the government leadership doesn’t seem to prioritize the USDA anymore. They say there’s no way to make sure deadly pathogens are not present in the meat that’s being distributed across the country. And, they say the beef industry is so consolidated – among four slaughterhouses that some collectively refer to as “Big Beef” – that they are killing and gutting and preparing so many cows per day that they’re heightening the risk of problems.

It’s no secret the current government isn’t in favor of the USDA. In a fact sheet produced by President Trump’s campaign team on September 25, 2016, “inspection overkill” described the system, and it called out the USDA and FDA as “food police” citing their “too strict” regulations and aimed to cut back on funding.

The next day, a new press release was issued, all traces of food inspections wiped from the statement. Then, the seat of Secretary of Agriculture was also the last cabinet positioned to be filed, in April 25, 2017.

Congress passed the Food Safety Modernization Act in 2011, which aims to ensure the U.S. food supply is safe by shifting the focus from responding to contamination to preventing it. However, Reana Kovalcik, National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition’s communications director, said the details of the policy left much to interpretation, and still does. Essentially the act overhauled food safety laws applied to safety on farm production. But, policy making after the original act is passed can take many painstaking years.

This is where things get murky, according to Kovalcik. “The FDA then has to create a whole series of laws for how this act would actually be implemented. The statute itself was very vague; said the agency should develop science based standards for ‘food safety protection’ and it left a huge amount of leeway for how it would actually go.”

The FDA had no response to the process of creating new laws, but according to the government website, new laws are created to “better protect public health by strengthening the food safety system... to focus more on preventing food safety problems.” However, there is no public literature available for how these new laws are created and processed within the FDA and USDA.

Dr. Dennis Burson, the extension meat specialist at the University of Nebraska, has similar concerns when it comes to policy and law within the USDA. And it’s a big concern for many. The USDA was originally created to serve a much smaller pool of farms, and on a more natural level, said Burson. Most of the rules we see in place were created when Big Beef- those four conglomerate slaughterhouses- which didn’t come into play until after World War Two- didn’t
exist. The rules were made for a different kind of cattle slaughtering that simply doesn’t exist today.

A lot of these stalwart rules are innocuous things like requiring slaughterhouses to have a separate bathroom designated just for the inspector. These are the rules that prevent smaller farms- like Sunfed- from being able to slaughter their own cows on site. “It’s weird, right? I don’t trust ‘big beef’ at all,” said Underwood. “The USDA rules and procedures are inhibitive and incredibly short sighted, and it’s terrifying. I’m terrified.” Other guidelines also have USDA inspectors present only for the killing/bloodletting portions of butchery. This leaves the weeks of “hook curing,” butchering and shipping unobserved. There’s also no outright rules on the inspectors per carcass ratio, according to Underwood.

It’s rules like those that are creating a monopoly among slaughterhouses, as smaller, more sustainably-minded producers can’t afford to run slaughterhouses with all of the bells and whistles these USDA rules require.

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Travis Stockstill, or America Butcher as he’s known on Instagram, works for a medium-sized slaughterhouse in Washington State. In his podcast, The Meat Block, he- and the occasional guest- describes the horrors of slaughterhouses that are a daily reality for butchers and inspectors. He recognizes the USDA as “a necessary evil,” for the job that he has to do. He describes having to “shuffle across the floor,” because hasty footsteps will cause butchers to slip and fall into pools of congealed blood that slowly create a pangea of crimson across cement floors. He notes abscesses as big as cantaloupes in some animals, and others, unborn babies- which should definitely be caught before killing even occurs, he said. Though, at the end of the day, most giant slaughterhouses are looking to make the profit, no matter what, and the older USDA rules mostly seek to eliminate animal cruelty, he noted.

The old rules aren’t the only problems in the system. “The rules update and change regularly so there are inspectors out there at all kinds of different training and knowledge levels within the inspection system,” said Burson. “It’s like passing a baton,” said Underwood of the confusion within the government agency.

For example, a ‘newer’ system within the USDA is HACCP, or Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points. Basically, HACCP is like a checklist that slaughterhouses and inspectors alike are responsible for maintaining. It is a system developed by the team of food scientists and engineers from The Pillsbury Company in the 1950s, but it wasn’t implemented in the USDA until July 1996. It was actualized to take the reliance off of Food Safety and Inspection Service inspectors ensuring that meat was safe to eat, and to put pressure on plants to make sure their facilities were safe enough for slaughtering processes. It pairs with the Food Safety Modernization Act, shifting the responsibility of safety from fixing the problem after it’s happened, to controlling environments beforehand to contain issues.
But when the USDA tries to enact the policy, it’s shut down by “safeguards” within the government. The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a lower court ruling in December 2001 that blocked the U.S. Department of Agriculture from shuttering a Texas meat-processing plant because it had failed the HACCP safety tests for salmonella levels three times. At one test, almost 50 percent of the beef was said to have salmonella present. Because salmonella is not an “adulterant,” or a not-naturally occurring product added to the beef, it was therefore deemed not able to be regulated by the USDA.

The court decided that the presence of salmonella alone did not make a product "injurious to health," even though there have been cases where the salmonella bacteria spreads from intestines to the bloodstream, thus rendering it deadly.

In an annual Center for Disease Control report on the top 31 pathogens in food that cause hospitalization and or death, salmonella- present in a food product- was responsible for 23,128 hospitalizations and 452 deaths in 2016. Most recently, the FDA released a statement that at least four antibiotics designed for salmonella contamination have been shown to be unresponsive. The document cites the over-treatment of antibiotics in animals for the cause of this new resistant salmonella. At least 2 million people in the U.S. contracted some sort of antibiotic-resistant bacteria in 2016, according to the CDC.

The requirements for HACCP in each facility are stated that: each facility have a written set of standard sanitation rules that are adhered to. This includes conducting regular microbial testing to ensure each facility isn’t at dangerous levels of bacteria, and “pathogen reduction performance standards” in the case of keeping diseases like salmonella out of the facility. Each place must have a system of controls that improve, not just appease, safety standards of the USDA.

Another issue is staffing. 200 critical jobs in the USDA were quietly cut earlier this year- according to Kovalcik. Additionally, there are 14 senior-level jobs within the USDA that need Senate confirmation to be filled. Currently, one of the 14 is: the Secretary of Agriculture. Pam Koch, a food systems educator at Teachers College sees trouble coming from empty jobs, as this leaves room for error and for unwanted policy to slip by unnoticed, especially because those jobs are in control of standardizing and passing new safety laws. “With these job gaps, there’s huge amount of leeway for danger,” she said at a Slow Food NY Conference on February 28, 2017 in Brooklyn, NY.

USDA’s discretionary budget also dropped by one-fifth last year, to its lowest level since 1988. This year’s budget of $1 billion will build back only 41 percent of those staff cuts from this year. The budget reduces funding for the Agricultural Research Service by $360 million, or 26 percent. This would mean closing the doors at 17 research centers that are responsible for things like pathogen studies.
Because of budgetary strains, 35 percent of "temporary inspectors," which the Food Safety and Inspection Service - a branch of the USDA - hired in 2014 for "poultry inspections" are actually overseeing beef, according to a FOIA request from April 2014. Meaning, under-trained, and improperly-trained, inspectors could be in charge of safe beef slaughtering, according to Burson.

The USDA-FSIS hires three different categories, or levels, of food inspectors: permanent, temporary and intermittent. According to the USDA employee manual, intermittent employees should not be employed for more than 12 months. Because the USDA budget was cut, the agency was forced to contract out low-paid temp positions in which was previously paid, professional career positions. No records exist of replacing or formally training the temporary employees for proper inspector careers. Training for poultry inspections versus beef inspections are vastly different, said Baker, because the pathogens- and their muscle compounds- are different. And, it costs less to train to be a poultry inspector.

Inspectors are located at nearly 6,500 slaughtering and processing establishments and import houses, and other federally-regulated facilities. 10 plus employees of the FSIS from around the country stated they work six- and sometimes seven- days a week routinely, and many are responsible for multiple facilities. “It’s a really demanding job,” said Burson.

Currently, four companies produce about 85% of America's beef- over 430 million pounds a year- and there are roughly one thousand operating slaughterhouses. On a good day, these powerhouse producers will oversee the slaughter of thousands of cows. This leaves a lot of room for human error.

On the slaughtering business side, owning a USDA-approved slaughterhouse is a trust system, according to Donna Elmore, who has worked on her family’s cattle farm for over 40 years. Slaughterhouse owners can also hire private inspectors for their businesses, according to Elmore. The facility then pays for their inspector to be trained and certified by the USDA-FSIS system.

Once a facility has completed a FSIS application for inspection, all meat that is going to be sold has to go through the USDA-inspected facility. Theoretically there are safeguards in place.

Yet safety continues to slip through the fingers of the USDA-FSIS despite these rules. 1,345,842 pounds were reported as recalled in 2015.

Foodborne illness is recognized as a critical public health problem in the United States. About 48 million people get sick, 228,744 are hospitalized, and almost 3,000 die each year from foodborne diseases, according to the latest estimates from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.
USDA-FSIS states in their safety manuals that they conduct public education campaigns to "inform consumers about safe food handling methods to decrease the likelihood of foodborne illness from products that were improperly stored." However, most recalls from foodborne illness-causing pathogens don’t originate from storage problems. The University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agriculture Sciences states that the "shiga-toxin-producing e.coli" is best kept at bay by proper cooking—a toasty 160°F—but the bacterium are not created by improper storage, only exacerbated.

E.coli is primarily found in ground beef products. This is because, according to Burson, the Nebraskan meat professor, all the parts that are more likely to contain, or come in contact with the bacteria—like the rump or thigh—are ground up together, creating an amalgamation of contamination. As cow carcasses are not checked for e.coli during slaughter, as it involves a lengthy test sample, and can take up to 48 hours to get results, tests are done after the beef is ground and processed.

For these kinds of inspections, the USDA calls the facility ahead of time, warning them of an upcoming “spot check.” When waiting for the inspectors, producers should, in theory, hold the product and not sell, said Burson. The test is only done on some batches; not every pack. So, a bad pack can still slip through. But, because they’re told in advance they can theoretically push product out ahead of the inspection and deal with the potential fallout. Overall, e.coli recalls result in over $255 million in losses each year for the food industry.

At the slaughtering and bloodletting stage, inspectors aren’t trained to look for signs of e.coli contamination anyway, according to Rochelle Hoover, an inspector in Pennsylvania. Their main job duties in the FSIS manual include upholding HACCP procedures, observing unnatural products, i.e. chemicals or antibiotics given to the animal at farm level, or an animal that is diseased. These animals found to have violated the safety rules are to be immediately discarded of—safely, of course.

Not all beef that is found to have contamination is immediately destroyed. In some cases, opportunities to clean the contamination is possible. “They’ll spray some of the carcasses with a bath that are deemed fixable and then they can be sold to market” said Burson on the citric acid or chlorine wash treatment some meat receives to be appraised as saleable.

This practice is part of what has gotten “American Beef” banned by the European Union since 1989. Due to the hormone levels allowed—almost 10 percent higher—and because of the chlorine and citric acid baths given to some cattle that are found to still be infected, the EU would rather not eat U.S. beef. Also, ingesting chlorine on top of a dangerous bacteria probably isn’t great. The U.S. is found to be sorely behind on food safety compared to other places. Other countries also have tighter meat inspections. In a report in 2003 by Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, it was found that 100 percent of their 1.3 million beef carcasses processed were inspected for disease.
Beef slaughtering in the U.S. is at an all-time high. In the newest numbers from the USDA, 25.3 billion pounds of beef were produced in 2016, which is six percent higher than the year before. The data shows that federal inspection let 506 million pounds of beef sold to consumers go through the system uninspected in 2016.

In the USDA’s mission statement, a blanket sentiment says they “inspect food facilities routinely.” Elmore said that it “really always seemed like you [the slaughterhouse] rely heavily on the USDA to do the right thing, and vise versa.”

However, it appears to be a flimsy routine. For example, Mt. McKinley Meat & Sausage Co, of Alaska, last had an inspection on February 28, 2017, according to a list of facilities approved for immediate receiving of slaughtered animals, but the company cites sales far into August according to a public business report. In May, a recall was issued for Marcho Farms, a processing facility in Souderton, PA. The facility was responsible for an e.coli outbreak that resulted in a recall of “5,620 pounds of boneless veal, and ground veal, beef and pork products.”

The facility was found to supply various outlets in Illinois, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Virginia. The recall was listed as a Class 1 outbreak, which according to the USDA means “a health hazard situation where there is a reasonable probability that the use of the product will cause serious, adverse health consequences or death.” In the same slaughterhouse list, Marcho Farms was last marked as having a facility inspection in January.

The USDA says it increases the frequency of spot checks if a facility has an outbreak or is known to violate HACCP procedures. However, Adams Farm in Athol, MA was responsible for an e.coli outbreak in August of 2016 that resulted in seven known, and publicized, cases of illness, with five of the cases having “traceback product” that identified Adams Farms as the perpetrator. However, after the August 2016 inspection incident, the next, and most recent, recorded inspection was in March 2017, a full seven months later.

“What is happening over there?” asked Mary Jo Dudley, Director of Cornell’s Farmworker Program, at the Slow Food NY conference. “Honestly, we don’t know, and it’s really quiet [in D.C.]. I guess we’ll see,” was Kovalcik’s response.

**Sources:**
Donna Elmore, farmer and slaughterhouse owner
John Patino, former USDA inspector
Rochelle Hoover, USDA inspector
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Matt Hartman, USDA inspector
Jacquelyn Veith, USDA inspector
Tonya Daniel, USDA inspector
Letricia Calhoun, USDA inspector
Sheryl Talley, USDA inspector
Elisa Aylala, USDA inspector
William Young, USDA inspector
Charlotte Suggs, USDA inspector
Sonia Melendez, USDA inspector
Steve Schuller, USDA inspector
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Michael J. Baker, PAS, PhD, Beef Cattle Extension Specialist at Cornell University
Katharine Ferguson, former USDA employee and U.S. Senate staffer
Michael Underwood, purveyor at Sunfed Beef
Fleishers Butchery; Sophie Grant, Marketing Director
Fleishers Butchery COO; Trevor Bundy
Mary Cleaver, chef and Slow Food Board Advisor
Mary Jo Dudley, Director of Cornell Farmworker Program
Pam Koch, Tisch Food Center Director
Reana Kovalcik, National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's communications director
Josh Morgenthau, NY State farmer
Margot Pollans, Professor at Haub School of Law and NRDC Food Law Initiative
Slow Food NYC Director Holley Atkinson