



Factory Beef Production

Since the 1980s a series of mergers and acquisitions has resulted in concentrating over 80% of the 35 million beef cattle slaughtered annually in the U.S. into the hands of four huge corporations.

Many beef cattle are born and live on the range, foraging and fending for themselves for months or even years. They are not adequately protected against inclement weather, and they may die of dehydration or freeze to death. Injured, ill, or otherwise ailing animals do not receive necessary veterinary attention. One common malady afflicting beef cattle is called "cancer eye." Left untreated, the cancer eats away at the animal's eye and face, eventually producing a crater in the side of the animal's head.

Accustomed to roaming unimpeded and unconstrained, range cattle are frightened and confused when humans come to round them up. Terrified animals are often injured, some so severely that they become "downed" (unable to walk or even stand). These downed animals commonly suffer for days without receiving food, water or veterinary care, and many die of neglect. Others are dragged, beaten, and pushed with tractors on their way to slaughter.

Many cattle will experience additional transportation and handling stress at stockyards and auctions, where they are goaded through a series of walkways and holding pens and sold to the highest bidder. From the auction, older cattle may be taken directly to slaughter, or they may be taken to a feedlot. Younger animals and breeding-age cows may go back to the range.

Ranchers still identify cattle the same way they have since pioneer days — with hot iron brands. Needless to say, this practice is extremely traumatic and painful, and the animals bellow loudly as ranchers' brands are burned into their skin. Beef cattle are also subjected to 'waddling,' another type of identification marking. This painful procedure entails cutting chunks out of the hide that hangs under the animals' necks. Waddling marks are supposed to be large enough so that ranchers can identify their cattle from a distance.

Most beef cattle spend the last few months of their lives at feedlots, crowded by the thousands into dusty, manure-laden holding pens. The air is thick with harmful bacteria and particulate matter, and the animals are at a constant risk for respiratory disease. Feedlot cattle are routinely implanted with growth-promoting hormones, and they are fed unnaturally rich diets designed to fatten them quickly and profitably. Because cattle

are biologically suited to eat a grass-based, high fiber diet, their concentrated feedlot rations contribute to metabolic disorders.

Cattle may be transported several times during their lifetimes, and they may travel hundreds or even thousands of miles during a single trip. Long journeys are very stressful and contribute to disease and even death. The *Drover's Journal* reports, "Shipping fever costs livestock producers as much as \$1 billion a year."

Young cattle are commonly taken to areas with cheap grazing land, to take advantage of this inexpensive feed source. Upon reaching maturity, they are trucked to a feedlot to be fattened and readied for slaughter. Eventually, all of them will end up at the slaughterhouse.

A standard beef slaughterhouse kills 250 cattle every hour. The high speed of the assembly line makes it increasingly difficult to treat animals with any semblance of humaneness. A *Meat & Poultry* article states, "Good handling is extremely difficult if equipment is 'maxed out' all the time. It is impossible to have a good attitude toward cattle if employees have to constantly overexert themselves, and thus transfer all that stress right down to the animals, just to keep up with the line."

Prior to being hung up by their back legs and bled to death, cattle are supposed to be rendered unconscious, as stipulated by the federal Humane Slaughter Act. This 'stunning' is usually done by a mechanical blow to the head. However, the procedure is terribly imprecise, and inadequate stunning is inevitable. As a result, conscious animals are often hung upside down, kicking and struggling, while a slaughterhouse worker makes another attempt to render them unconscious. Eventually, the animals will be "stuck" in the throat with a knife, and blood will gush from their bodies whether or not they are unconscious.

This is detailed in an April 2001 *Washington Post* article, which describes typical slaughterplant conditions:

The cattle were supposed to be dead before they got to Moreno. But too often they weren't.

They blink. They make noises, he said softly. The head moves, the eyes are wide and looking around. Still Moreno would cut. On bad days, he says, dozens of animals reached his station clearly alive and conscious. Some would survive as far as the tail cutter, the belly ripper, the hide puller. They die, said Moreno, piece by piece...

"In plants all over the United States, this happens on a daily basis," said Lester Friedlander, a veterinarian and formerly chief government inspector at a Pennsylvania hamburger plant. "I've seen it happen. And I've talked to other veterinarians. They feel it's out of control."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture oversees the treatment of animals in meat plants, but enforcement of the law varies dramatically. While a few plants have been forced to halt production for a few hours because of alleged animal cruelty, such sanctions are rare.

Reaction to the *Washington Post* investigative piece and others like it precipitated a Congressional resolution reiterating the importance of the Humane Slaughter Act, but to date, there is little if any indication that the situation for animals in slaughterhouses has appreciably improved.