

Food Processing & Slaughterhouses

The drastic expansion of industrial animal production in the US has been accompanied by the rapid consolidation of the meat industry. This industry is now dominated by a handful of huge corporations that process most of the country's meat at enormous facilities, and consolidation continues to increase. As of 2007, four companies controlled the processing of over 80% of the country's beef and three of these same companies (along with an additional fourth) process over 60% of the country's pork.^[1] Additionally, the four major companies in broiler chicken processing provide over half of the country's chicken supply. The same situation exists for turkey meat.^[1] As a result of this concentration, meat packing companies have become increasingly powerful, while the government bodies that regulate them have done little to keep them in line.

When animals are slaughtered and processed (i.e., when the meat is cut up and packaged), several dangerous elements come into play. The first is the presence of fecal matter from slaughtered animals, which can contaminate meat with high levels of bacteria such as *E. coli*. Other sanitation lapses can also contaminate food, as can animal diseases like *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*. Another food safety hazard is the risk from mad cow disease (a key step to preventing humans from contracting the disease is the proper removal of risky nervous system materials from the beef supply). In addition to these food safety risks, the use of hazardous machinery and sharp knives can injure workers when mistakes are made. This danger is exacerbated by the increasingly rapid speeds at which workers are expected to slaughter and process animals.

Food Safety

Federal health authorities have estimated that foodborne diseases sicken 1 in 6 Americans (or 48 million people), cause 128,000 hospitalizations, and kill 3,000 Americans every year.^[2] Likewise, a number of studies have confirmed the presence of harmful bacteria in meat in the US. After collecting ground beef samples from meat processing plants around the country in 1996, the USDA determined that 7.5% of the beef samples were contaminated with *Salmonella*, 11.7% were contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*, 30% were contaminated with *Staphylococcus Aureus*, and 53.3% were contaminated with *Clostridium perfringens*.^[3]

These unacceptable levels of contamination are caused by the crowded conditions in which conventional food animals are raised, as well as the high speed at which meat is processed. In order to maximize profits, meat processors have continually increased the speed of their production lines. Twenty years ago, meatpacking plants slaughtered about 175 cattle an hour, but, due to increased line speeds, today plants can slaughter as many as 400 cattle per hour.^[4]

In order to ensure the safety of the meat supply, processors must make efforts to keep feces from spreading from the animals' intestines or hides onto the tables and tools for butchering, or onto the meat itself. But because the production lines are forced to move so quickly, it is exceedingly difficult to butcher the carcasses with the care necessary to prevent this kind of contamination. As a result, meat often becomes contaminated with bacteria that cause foodborne illness.

The US continues to experience periodic large-scale outbreaks of foodborne illness and large recalls of contaminated meat. In 2002, ConAgra was forced to recall 19 million pounds of beef produced at its Greeley, Colorado, processing facility after meat contaminated with *E. coli* 0157:H7 killed a woman and sickened 35 others. By the time the meat was recalled, about 80% of it had already been consumed.^[5]

Meat Inspection

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulates meat and poultry in the US, ensuring that all meat and poultry for commercial sale is produced with government inspectors present. However, as a result of weak regulations and lack of control over meat companies, the USDA has still failed to effectively safeguard the US meat supply, creating an ongoing threat to consumer health.

In 1996, the USDA introduced a new meat inspection program called the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) system. This system was intended to modernize meat inspection and introduce testing for the bacteria that make people sick. Unfortunately, HACCP has some major shortcomings.

The HACCP system allows many inspection tasks to be carried out by the meat companies themselves, and actually reduces the involvement of USDA inspectors.^[6] This is highly problematic, not least because meat companies are unlikely to slow or stop production in order to deal with a problem or remove potentially contaminated meat from the line. Under HACCP, the USDA has actually discouraged its inspectors from stopping production lines when they suspect contamination. In one USDA memo, the agency stated that inspectors would be held responsible for halting production unless there was absolute evidence of product contamination – an unfair burden to impose on inspectors charged with the task of evaluating meat as it speeds down a production line.^[7]

Another significant shortcoming of the current inspection system is the USDA's lack of authority to order product recalls or to issue fines when companies persistently violate food safety rules. Upon discovery of contaminated meat, the USDA cannot demand that a company recall its products and only has the power to consult with a company about how it should handle the situation.^[4] This slows the recall process and allows for unsuspecting consumers to buy and eat contaminated products even when authorities are aware of the contamination.

Similarly, the USDA cannot shut down a plant that does not meet sanitation requirements, which often causes lengthy delays between the discovery of unsanitary facilities and action taken to improve their conditions. In 2002, Public Citizen and the Government Accountability Project discovered that even after repeatedly testing positive for Salmonella contamination, several ground beef processing plants were allowed to continue to sell meat for months before steps were taken to clean up their facilities.^[8]

Worker Safety

Meat processing facilities are known to pose significant threats to worker safety. In a 2005 report, the Government Accountability Office described the threats to meat and poultry industry workers, who deal with “hazardous conditions involving loud noise, sharp tools, and dangerous machinery. Many workers must stand for long periods of time wielding knives and hooks to slaughter or process meat on a production line that moves very quickly. Workers responsible for cleaning the plant must use strong chemicals and hot pressurized water.”^[9]

Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows (from 2003-2007) the rate of illnesses and injuries for workers in animal slaughtering and processing was more than twice as high as the national average, and the rate of illnesses alone was more than ten times the national average.^[10] Common ailments among slaughterhouse workers include back problems, torn muscles and pinched nerves, as well as more dramatic injuries such as broken bones, deep cuts and amputated fingers and limbs.^[4]

Although meat processing is a difficult and dangerous occupation, precautions can be taken to minimize the threats to worker safety. Among the most important safeguards is to set reasonably-paced production line speeds so that workers are able to process meat without putting themselves or their coworkers at risk of injury. However, in order to maximize profits, meat processing companies continue to maintain unreasonably fast line speeds, thereby jeopardizing the safety of both workers and the food supply. These companies also continue to pressure the government to limit the authority of USDA inspectors.

Time for Change

Given the high incidence of worker injury, the recurrence of sanitary violations at meat processing facilities, and continual outbreaks of foodborne illnesses caused by contaminated meat, it is clear that the US meat processing industry is in dire need of reform. Production line speeds should be slowed to a pace at which workers can perform their duties safely and food safety standards can be guaranteed. Government oversight of food safety standards must also be improved. In order to protect public health, the USDA should conduct more rigorous inspections at meat processing facilities and should have the authority to order recalls of contaminated meat as well as the power to shut down plants that fail to meet food safety standards.

Alternatives

In general, small-scale, independent slaughterhouses tend to provide safer products than most giant meatpacking plants due to the fact that they process much smaller quantities of meat and operate at a slower pace. Although consumer demand for local, sustainably-produced meats is growing, satisfying this demand is no easy task, in large part because decades of agribusiness control of the meat system have wiped out the infrastructure needed to produce and market meat from small farms. Small slaughter and processing operations have been closing across the country because of industry consolidation, low profit margins, the complexities of federal regulation, and the challenges of disposing of slaughter byproducts. Between 1998 and 2007, the total number of government-inspected slaughter facilities fell by over 20%.^[11] But despite the odds stacked against them, some small slaughterhouses and processors are finding ways to survive.

Fortunately, there are many sustainable farmers and ranchers throughout the US that care about where their animals are processed. So if you buy directly from a farmer or rancher, he or she will be able to tell you exactly where the meat was processed, and what kind of practices that facility uses.

Did You Know?

- Meat production in the US is controlled in large part by just a handful of companies. Four companies control 83% of beef processing. Four companies control 66% of pork processing. Four companies control 58% of broiler chicken production and processing.^[1]
- Some of the biggest meat processing companies in the US are Tyson, Cargill, National Beef Packing Co., Smithfield Foods, and Pilgrim's Pride.^[1]
- Since meatpacking plants are fined when injury rates are high, plant managers and owners have been known to keep false logs that misrepresent the actual occurrence of injury and illness by as much as 1,000%.^[4]
- According to a 2005 Government Accountability Office report, meat and poultry workers generally earn a median salary of about \$21,320 per year; the typical pay in all manufacturing sectors is \$33,500.^[9]

FOOTNOTES

- ^[1] Heffeman, W. & Hendrickson, M. (2007). Concentration of agricultural markets. *University of Missouri*,

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