Reforming Farming Practices

In recent years, a rising chorus of diverse voices has been clamoring to expose the true costs of factory farming. The HSUS has led the discussion, revealing the cruelty, environmental devastation, and disastrous public health consequences of animal agribusiness.

Thanks largely to our efforts, the writing is on the wall for confinement practices that virtually immobilize egg-laying hens, breeding pigs, and veal calves. On the heels of our successful 2008 ballot campaign to prohibit these caging systems in California, political leaders in Maine and Michigan didn’t wait to hear from voters on this issue and led the charge to outlaw extreme confinement in 2009.

At the federal level, in March 2009 the Obama administration acted on our 2008 undercover investigation of dairy cow abuse at a California slaughterhouse, closing a loophole that had allowed the abuses to occur. Then in May, the Justice Department joined our lawsuit to hold the plant’s owners accountable. Later in the year, our investigation of a Vermont veal plant added to the demand for change.

In the corporate arena, we persuaded many more companies to begin purchasing cage-free eggs and helped food service provider Compass Group introduce more meat-free meals at its 8,500 dining locations. We also supported the Global Animal Partnership’s animal welfare rating system for food labels.

Our calls for reform have been echoed by environmentalists, family farmers, academics, authors, and lawmakers. In California, where state Sen. Dean Florez watched big agribusiness swallow up small Central Valley farms, he overhauled the Senate agriculture committee to bring new focus to consumer and animal welfare concerns, introducing a successful bill to prohibit the painful amputation of dairy cows’ tails.

Even those unnerved by our progress concede that we’re winning the fight. “We are overmatched,” wrote one industry representative. “The movement is defined by the Humane Society of the U.S. …” wrote another. The HSUS is “the nine-million-pound gorilla …” added a third. “They are good at building the agenda, good at framing issues … which is why they are effective.”

High compliments from defenders of an inhumane industry. On behalf of the billions of animals counting on our success, we’ll gladly accept them.
Wood County, Ohio, resident Vickie Askins says it’s the “small family farmers and moms and grandpas and just regular people” in her community who’ve been battling to keep out industrial farms that crowd animals indoors, pump out toxic emissions, and pollute the water. Despite their efforts, up to six concentrated animal feeding operations may soon be open in the county. But in 2009, The HSUS began building a campaign that has reenergized residents in their fight against the seeming collusion among large farms and indifference by local and state regulatory agencies. A measure planned for Ohio’s November 2010 ballot targets the inhumane confinement methods that enable factory farms to cage massive numbers of animals for maximum profit.

In neighboring Michigan, lawmakers passed a similar proposal in 2009 after The HSUS and the farm industry came to a compromise on the bill’s scope. The measure found widespread support; as the Battle Creek Enquirer noted in an editorial, “Allowing enough room for animals to turn around and extend their limbs is not onerous government regulation, but rather ensuring their reasonable treatment.” By contrast, Ohio agribusiness refused to implement even these moderate reforms and spent millions on a campaign to create a livestock standards board dominated by defenders of the status quo. But Askins says she thinks that small family farmers will realize the effort “was just a deceptive ruse and the Farm Bureau isn’t there for them, but mainly for the industrial farmer.”

Askins herself grew up on a small dairy farm where the cows all had names, grazed outdoors, and were milked by hand. Animals on today’s factory farms, she says, aren’t treated like sentient beings. “They are just little machines in there and lost their status as one of God’s creatures.” And the farmers are more like full-time manure managers than animal caretakers. She welcomes our help in righting a system gone awry: “We are so grateful to The HSUS for everything you all do.”
I am not an extremist or a liberal. I am just a common, ordinary person that is very concerned about what is going on [with] the treatment of animals. … I know what The Humane Society has done in other states and what they can do in our state, and how they can change the mindset of people for the better.

—Ohioans for Humane Farms treasurer Tom Harrison, a retired sheep farmer

Exposing a Slaughterhouse of Horrors

Days-old veal calves arrived by the truckloads at the Bushway slaughter plant in Grand Isle, Vt. Umbilical cords still attached, they nuzzled workers under their bloodstained leather aprons and followed them around like puppies. The plant’s co-owner had a ghoulish response: “Go find Eddie; he’s your mother, he’s got something for you.” Eddie was the man who stunned them before slaughter. But he and his coworkers weren’t well trained or overly careful, and many calves were still conscious while their throats were slit or their heads sawed off.

This was just one of the horrors revealed by an HSUS undercover investigator who worked at the plant over a seven-week period in 2009. Employees were taped kicking, slapping, and repeatedly shocking bellowing infants. Animals who couldn’t make it to the kill floor were shot with a captive bolt gun. But too often the shooter missed the target, and workers failed to ensure the death of the calves, who sometimes kicked and gasped for hours after being bolted.

Meanwhile, the on-site USDA inspector certified animals who could barely stand as fit for slaughter, stood by while a calf was skinned alive, and “never made one complaint, no matter how brutal the treatment,” says the investigator. When shown the shocking images, the USDA and the Vermont Agency of Agriculture ordered the plant’s immediate shutdown. The HSUS is now pushing the USDA to go a step further and close a regulatory loophole allowing slaughter of downer calves too ill or hurt to stand on their own.

Mopping up blood and taking out slaughterhouse waste aren’t exactly the career the HSUS investigator envisioned for himself. He’d once planned to be a policeman but then realized animals, especially those on factory farms, need more investigative allies. The government’s swift response in closing the plant gives him hope for the future. “Though it’s not nearly where it needs to be, we’re starting to receive more cooperation from the police and the government. … I think they’re recognizing the legitimacy of the investigations we’re doing.”
Taking on Big Ag Polluters

Larry Yepez remembers days long past when he could sleep in the back of a pickup truck outside his Lathrop, Calif., home, marveling at the stars and the beauty of the night.

But more than 10 years ago, an egg factory farm opened down the road, eventually confining more than 600,000 chickens and draining the animals’ waste into a giant cesspool. Ever since, going outside for just a few minutes has often been unbearable. Some of Yepez’s friends won’t visit because of the stench; one even got sick in his driveway. The Yepezes and their neighbors have suffered from headaches, sinus problems, and throat irritation; Larry’s son, Wayne, relishes the days he wakes up not feeling sick.

Residents have complained to authorities, but Yepez says they’re treated like hypochondriacs or shooed away as city people queasy about country smells. Then two years ago, HSUS attorneys arrived bearing legal aid—and hope. They filed a lawsuit against the Olivera Egg Ranch, alleging violation of two federal laws providing for a citizen’s right to know what toxins they’ve been exposed to. They also filed petitions seeking local investigations into potential water pollution and failure to obtain air pollution permits, resulting in key decisions against the company in 2009 and early 2010.

In New York, our litigation team has taken on another agribusiness polluter, Hudson Valley Foie Gras. A federal court in Manhattan cleared the way in August 2009 for a lawsuit against the nation’s largest producer of this French “delicacy,” made by inhumanely force-feeding ducks. Government records show the facility has failed to properly monitor slaughter waste discharged into the Middle Mongaup River, resulting in more than 30,000 violations of the federal Clean Water Act.

Yepez says while he formerly resigned himself to being sick, The HSUS’s assistance has given him a sense of empowerment. “Now it’s like, ‘Oh no, this is not right! This is not fair. This is outrageous.’” His family doesn’t want to move away from the home they worked so hard to settle. And now, with The HSUS prodding the government to take notice of their plight, perhaps they won’t have to.
A More Humane Supply Chain

Bowtie pasta with tomato sauce, veggie burgers, a salad bar—food services director Robin Vogler has revamped lunch at the Somers/Lakeside School District 29 in northwestern Montana to give students plenty of options for eating lower on the food chain. Starting with the 2009-10 school year, she has also rid the schools’ cafeterias of eggs produced by hens living in barren cages so small they can’t even spread their wings.

Vogler, who grew up among Nebraska ranchers and farmers, disagrees “emphatically” with factory farming practices that treat animals as commodities. She says the menu changes have been well worth the extra time and planning. “We are educating students to make choices that affect their health and the health of the planet, and to be ethical in making these choices,” she says. “What could be more important than this?”

The HSUS helped Vogler find a cage-free supplier as part of its campaign to guide educational institutions, restaurants, and corporate cafeterias in reducing or ending their purchases of battery eggs. In 2009, we secured pledges from companies such as Wendy’s, Red Robin, P.F. Chang’s, House of Blues, Au Bon Pain, Gap, and Bruegger’s.

When friendly discussions don’t succeed, we try other tactics to nudge companies in the right direction, such as buying enough shares in corporate stock to have a voice in company decisions. At McDonald’s 2009 annual meeting, an HSUS shareholder resolution urged the company to phase in cage-free eggs in its U.S. restaurants, a move the fast-food giant has resisted for years. We told the animals’ side of the story in a meeting otherwise dominated by talk of profit—and fellow shareholders literally applauded the message. Garnering a record number of votes, the measure will appear again on the 2010 proxy.

A few companies try to rebuff these democratic exercises. In 2009, Denny’s appealed to the Securities and Exchange Commission to exclude our cage-free proposal from its proxy materials. But The HSUS’s legal team convinced the SEC to deny Denny’s claim that it is not responsible for the actions of its suppliers, an important victory that will serve as an example to other companies resistant to change.

2009 Impact: 2 state laws passed to free farm animals from extreme confinement in Michigan and Maine / 10 million animals per year to be helped by the Michigan law / Slaughter of downed adult cows banned through federal regulation / 1.8 million dairy cows in California to be protected from tail docking / 100 educational and corporate commitments made to improve welfare purchasing policies / 5 shareholder resolutions filed to improve conditions for farm animals