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Face Off With the USDA

The hidden atrocity of face branding

Entering the United States is a nightmare if you're a Mexican-bred steer. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) requires all steers imported into the United States from Mexico to have the letter "M" branded on their right cheeks. Now the USDA proposes to expand this torture to all cattle coming from Mexico—a pathetic gesture at monitoring tuberculosis.

First, the steer is herded into an enclosure—often with the aid of an electric prod—and his head pinned between metal bars. Then steel pinchers are clamped painfully to the terrified animal's nostrils and he's tied to the bars. Sometimes the steer continues to struggle so the cowboy pushes his boot into the steer's face to hold him tighter.

As the hot iron is pulled from the fire and brought close to the steer's face, the terrorized steer bellows, his eyes bulge and roll back into his head—and when the iron is pressed against the animal's face, he literally disappears in a cloud of his own burning flesh. Occasionally, the "M" is unclear and the steer must live through this torture a second time.

Like many other animals, cattle have extremely thin facial hair and a high density of nerves in the facial area, making their cheeks particularly sensitive to pain. Infuriatingly, this torture of animals is totally unnecessary because alternatives are currently available.

People are known to have used hot iron brands to identify cattle for about 5,000 years. The first known brands in the Americas were those of Herman Cortez who landed in Mexico in 1519. While cowboys avoided branding the face, the USDA had no such qualms. On the contrary, the USDA claimed the face as its proprietary branding property.

In 1986, the USDA decreed that farmers must hot iron brand their dairy cows if they wanted to participate in the government's dairy buy-out program. This program planned to slaughter 1.5 million dairy cows to reduce an oversupply of milk. Ironically, the USDA is once again promoting an increase of milk production by dosing already overstressed cows with hormones.

In addition to family farm protests, the Rochester Humane Society challenged the USDA requirement. In April 1986, Federal Judge Michael A. Telesca issued a temporary restraining order, saying that the USDA did not consider several other less painful methods for permanently marking animals. "It is evident to me, as it should have been to the Department of Agriculture," he said, "that the type of branding espoused constitutes cruelty to animals ... It has long been the public policy of this country to avoid cruelty to animals."

Now, eight years later, the USDA has still not abolished face branding and continues to drag its feet in seriously considering alternatives. Methods immediately available include punching a distinctive symbol in the ear, notching the ear or branding near the edge of the hide on the rear. But the most sophisticated and least harmful method for identifying and tracking animals is electronic micro chip identification. Such chips are already available for insertion in companion animals and is currently used to identify animals raised for food in some Canadian and European enterprises.

John W. Harman, Director of Food and Agricultural Issues with Congress' Government Accounting Office, said that the USDA's "inspection system is only marginally better today at protecting the public from harmful bacteria than it was a year ago—or even 87 years ago when it was first put in place." Harman's comments were submitted to Congress in the wake of the recent *E. coli* outbreak in the Northwest.

The corporate sector is already beginning to respond. Recent initiatives include the adoption of humane guidelines by the American Meat Institute, phasing out of shackling and hoisting by major meat processors, and, most recently, a written corporate commitment by fast food giant McDonald's requiring its meat suppliers to adhere to humane guidelines.

Public outrage was transformed into cultural change when the Draize rabbit blinding cosmetics test was challenged, enabling animal protectionists, science, industry and government to work together, an initiative which resulted in an estimated 50% reduction in the use of laboratory animals.

Imagine the impact of a similar cooperative effort on animal agriculture: reducing the pain and suffering of seven billion farm animals. This is best done by adapting the proven strategy of the 3Rs to farm animals: Replacement or Reduction of meat and the products of animal agriculture in one's diet, combined with Refinement, implementing methods which reduce the pain and stress of animals raised for food.

Face branding cannot continue. It is indefensible. However, the USDA is slow to move. It will not take action unless we do. It's not enough to think right and feel right about the problem. The key to abolishing face branding is turning thoughts into action. And here's how you can begin:

Contact your newspaper, radio and TV station. Tell them you think face branding is outrageous. And ask them to do a story exposing this horror.

Write, phone or visit your Washington senators and representative. Ask them to contact Director Mike Espy at the USDA and find out what he's doing to stop face branding.

Contact Mike Espy directly. You can phone him at (202) 720-3631; fax him at (202) 720-2166, or write him at USDA, Room 200A, 12th & Jefferson Drive SW, Washington, DC 20250. Also: Photocopy page 36 (next page) in this issue and distribute it in your community or run it as an advertisement in your local newspaper.

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