



COVID-19 exposes animal agriculture's vulnerability

Leah Garcés¹

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When COVID-19 first drew the attention of global health experts in early January 2020, no one saw what would come next. Just two months later, the world all but stopped turning. Nearly every nation had ordered its people to stay home, and economies had crashed. The health of all citizens was in question.

No industry is immune to this crisis, including industrial animal agriculture. COVID-19 has exposed the vulnerability of our protein production machine and laid bare the urgent need for systemic change. The system cannot handle a single disruptive wave, let alone the tsunami this pandemic has stirred.

The world's gaze landed on the meat industry when slaughterhouses emerged as major COVID-19 hotspots. With workers required to stand shoulder to shoulder on the slaughter line, it's no surprise. In South Dakota, as reported in mid-April, at least 40% of infections had occurred at a single *Smithfield Foods* slaughter plant (Dickerson and Jordan 2020). As the number of infected workers soared and caused staff shortages, the Smithfield plant and many others *closed or dramatically slowed production* (Corkery and Yaffe-Bellany 2020). While sensible, this initiated a cascade of consequences throughout the industry supply chain, including the planned *on-farm killing of millions of animals* who had been scheduled for slaughter (Lauria 2020).

Indeed, just one hit to the meat industry's weak spot causes the whole machine to break down. Of course, COVID-19 has tested other facets of the food sector, but thousands of sick slaughterhouse workers and millions of wasted animal lives illustrate the unique frailties of the system built to meet our global demand for animal protein.

In truth, the system was ripe for disruption. The devastating near-term consequences of its meltdown—especially for

workers, farmers, and animals—may be the motivation we need to reevaluate and rebuild.

After all, industrial animal agriculture poses not just short-term problems; it is at the root of so many of the world's most pressing long-term challenges: *climate change* (Gerber et al. 2013), *chronic disease* (Pan et al. 2012), *antibiotic resistance* (WHO 2017), *species extinction* (Machovina et al. 2015), and *deforestation* (Steinfeld et al. 2006). Most disturbingly, it is responsible for deadly *swine flu* (CDC 2009) and *bird flu* (CDC 2015) pandemics of the past. The human *death rate for H5N1*, a strain of bird flu, surpasses that of COVID-19 (CDC 2015). Almost certainly, it will cause pandemics of the future, unless we act now. As one scientist warns, factory farms are “the most likely epicenter of *the next pandemic*” (Hollenbeck 2016). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations even stated that “livestock health is the weakest link in our *global health chain*” (FAO 2013).

Clearly our protein production model is broken. It threatens not only workers and animals but our environment, farmers, consumers, and health as a global society. But we can begin to fix it in three ways.

First, we must move away from this system that treats animals like widgets rather than the sentient beings they are. This means breeding animals for robustness and giving them more space and better conditions—in other words, eliminating the filthy warehouses packed with disease- and injury-prone animals that we see today.

Second, we must diversify our protein sources. Plant-based protein is more efficient and sustainable to produce than animal protein. Several of the largest meat companies already offer plant-based protein as well as “blended” protein (part animal meat, part plant). From Tyson to Perdue to Cargill, Big Meat knows that homogeneous production is risky. Demand for animal meat grows about 2% each year, but sales of plant-based meat and other direct replacements for animal products jumped 11% in 2019 (Gaan 2020). Governments can encourage this plant-based push by providing grants to scientists studying alternative protein production

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✉ Leah Garcés
LeahG@MercyForAnimals.org

¹ Mercy For Animals, Los Angeles, CA, USA

rather than funding *cruel experiments* for the meat industry (Moss 2015).

Third, we must empower animal farmers to lead this global transition from factory farming by helping them grow plants, such as hemp, mushrooms, and leafy greens, instead. Transition programs are cropping up across the country. We should support these efforts to help farmers escape an industry that *exploits them* and create a new rural America (Lowrey 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic is perhaps our best chance to hit reset on our protein production system and reimagine how to feed the world. It is not a matter of feasibility, but of political and social will. Now is the time for policymakers to stop bailing out Big Meat and conducting business as usual; they must make the tough decisions necessary to create a safe food system. Corporations must shift their supply chains to improve animal welfare while growing the market share of plant-based products. Consumers should embrace alternatives to animal products that are just as delicious but far more sustainable. It is up to all of us.

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Leah Garcés is the president of Mercy For Animals. She has been fighting for better food and farming systems for nearly 20 years as a leader in the animal protection movement. She oversaw international campaigns in 14 countries at the World Society for the Protection of Animals and launched Compassion in World Farming in the United States. She is the author of *Grilled: Turning Adversaries into Allies to Change the Chicken Industry* from Bloomsbury Publishing. Leah's work has been featured in many national media outlets including *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Vox*, *Vice Magazine*, and the *Chicago Tribune* among others. Leah is also on the advisory councils of Encompass and Rebellious Foods. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her husband, three kids, and two cats.