

Dying for Industry: Pathological Cruelty to Animals, Industrial-scale Exploitation and Killing

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“Pathological cruelty and neglect have to be dealt with so that animals do not fall prey to the farming trade’s worst practitioners. This means that the meagre welfare laws and regulatory restraints currently in place must be strengthened and enforced. But no-one should imagine that either regulated or unregulated suffering can be banished from animal farming and slaughter. Meat, egg and milk production are pitiless, bloody activities that are predicated on industrial-scale animal exploitation and killing.” Animal Aid

I’ve known some really good farmers; farmers who genuinely care for their animals and their land; farmers whose animals last far longer than average; who allow old milk cows to live out their lives on the farm. “They’ve earned it,” the farmers say.

And I’ve come across farmers who are far too slow to react to reports of an injured animal, or one with bloat, or one that’s ‘down’ in a field. I’ve come across a farmer ‘trimming’ a cow’s feet with an angle grinder. I’ve seen dead calves tossed in a corner of the yard. So, sadly, the horrifying [Uncounted Dead](#) report by Animal Aid came as no surprise.

The figures are almost too large to make sense of. We slaughter nearly 1 billion animals (cattle, sheep, pigs, poultry) a year for the sake of endless cheap meat. Farming on such a scale not only kills the animals, it deadens our perceptions of and respect for other forms of life. As Animal Aid says, they become commodities, packed into the agricultural equivalent of Amazon warehouses.

Is it any wonder that animals raised in such conditions get injured, suffer from disease and, through sheer numbers, die of neglect? It is, although it shouldn’t be, impossible to rescue them from fire or flood, or at the very least, greatly lessen the risk of fires and flooding. They’re transported all over the country, stuffed into large lorries or insecure trailers, and inevitably die, sometimes in large numbers, in road accidents.

The report’s damning conclusions are: “these incidents account for tens of millions of animals dying prematurely every year – from disease, neglect, fire, punishing weather, traffic collisions and other causes. Our estimate for the annual total is 43 million. These fatalities are inevitable and predictable. They are the ‘collateral damage’ of British farming.”

43 million is only an estimate, but it is a careful one. Defra, the NFU and farmers would argue it can’t be anything like that. True. It could well be more. No one really knows because the figures aren’t properly recorded or collated. At least Animal Aid has taken the trouble to look at the problem.

All herds and flocks are given a registered number. All individual cattle, sheep and pigs are

given a number and ear-tagged. Their ear tags show their number and the herd number. All this is done to help contain and minimise the spread of disease. When registered animals die their 'passports' have to be surrendered. So Defra does have those numbers, should they care to look. Poultry aren't given even the small dignity of an individual number.

On December 2, the BBC's Farming Today programme's Anna Hill interviewed Catherine McLaughlin, the NFU animal health and welfare adviser, on the NFU's opinion of the report:

A.H. What did you make of the report?

C.M. I think, to be honest, it's probably not very helpful to anyone. It's Animal Aid using tragic accidents and circumstances to further their own agenda, to be honest.

A.H. What did you think of the figures?

C.M. I'm not going to comment,,, I'm not prepared to comment on Animal Aid's estimated figures, to be honest. It's their figures, if they want to justify them - maybe that's what's in the report, I don't know. I do know that the industry has recognised best animal practice health statistics, which farmers are encouraged to work to, and I think, to be honest, if you look at hard statistics and figures, you risk ignoring the subtleties of people working out whether it's a planned cull or an unplanned cull, and sometimes, understanding the figures behind the statistics, it's a really important thing and I'm not sure headline figures are very useful.

Farmers do take their responsibilities for the welfare of their animals very seriously, and this responsibility means that sometimes difficult decisions and actions need to be taken to preserve and protect quality of life, and the quality of death of those animals. You've got to remember that animals will die on farms through accidents or disease, and it's not in the farmer's interest to have 'high on-farm mortality' which clearly impacts on a farm's profitability.

A.H. But it is still an animal welfare issue....

C.M. Oh, it is, absolutely, and death is not always the worst outcome for an animal, and sometimes it is better to kill an animal...

A.H. Some would argue with you on that, surely...

C.M. It is better to kill an animal in a calm, controlled and respectful manner than to preserve life at any cost...

A.H. Should the NFU ask for figures?

C.M. The UK has a very good record on animal welfare. This is an animal welfare issue after all, and the NFU would rather concentrate on animal health measures.

Reassured that the NFU is taking this seriously? No, I didn't think so. "To be honest", their spokeswoman appeared not to have read the report. To be honest, the NFU doesn't want to look at high on-farm mortality rates. And, to be honest, coming out with the phrase 'high on-farm mortality' argues that they are aware of the problem, even if they don't want to log it, although surely they would be worried about the loss of profits that the avoidable deaths of

millions of animals represent.

They don't want to look at the vast numbers of animals being transported around the country with the inevitable road accidents. They don't want to condemn a business which, having built huge chicken-houses on a flood plain resulting in the buildings being flooded and 700,000 chickens drowned, is now rebuilding in the same place.

Farm fires are common, too common. Because of high numbers being confined in crates and pens in buildings, chickens and pigs (one of the most intelligent of animals) are particularly susceptible to flooding and fires. But the NFU doesn't want to look at the 2,000 piglets and 166 sows burnt to death, followed by further 670 dying in another fire 7 months later at the same place.

And it certainly doesn't want to look at neglect. There are some horrifying cases. Last year [two brothers](#) from the Vale of Glamorgan were found guilty of neglecting a large herd of ex dairy cows and calves. The herd had been so badly neglected that around 60 of them became so emaciated that they had already died or been put down on welfare grounds. The Hillside Animal Sanctuary has taken in the [remaining 90 animals](#). In August this year a [North Yorkshire farmer](#) was jailed - 350 dead and dying animals were found on his farm.

Reading the report it becomes clear that safety issues, checks on things like electrical circuits and equipment and above all, ignoring all the advice and animal welfare and safety regulations are as much a matter of neglect by farmers as the animals supposedly in their care. Yet the NFU and its farmers are lobbying for the removal of 'red tape', regulations that are here to help farmers and protect their animals.

And how many animals get injured because of overcrowding; because of the haste to get them to market and onto your plate as quickly as possible, regardless of their natural rates of growth? And how many die, unseen, at the back of the barn or shed, because there are simply too many animals for any farmer to check? So much for the UK's 'good animal welfare record'.

And then there are all those animals sent early to slaughter. Should we add to 40+ millions of farm animals dying pre-slaughter, the thousands of cattle [slaughtered](#) because of mastitis - surely a welfare/health problem; or because of lameness - often a sign of poor welfare, poor housing and neglect?

It makes the 31,723 TB-infected cattle slaughtered last year (and much of that meat goes into the food chain - Defra recouping its costs) look almost minimal, if it wasn't for the fact that all these numbers represent living sentient animals industrially raised and industrially killed.

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