**Headline**: How to Fix Our Food System

**Teaser**: No food should be worth the amount of suffering experienced by sentient animals trapped in our food system.

By Reynard Loki

**Author Bio**: [Reynard Loki](https://observatory.wiki/Reynard_Loki) is a co-founder of the [Observatory](https://observatory.wiki/), where he is the [environment](https://observatory.wiki/Environment) and [animal rights](https://observatory.wiki/Animal_Rights) editor. He is also a writing fellow at the [Independent Media Institute](https://independentmediainstitute.org/), where he serves as the editor and chief correspondent for [Earth | Food | Life](https://independentmediainstitute.org/earth-food-life/). He previously served as the environment, food, and animal rights editor at AlterNet and as a reporter for Justmeans/3BL Media covering sustainability and corporate social responsibility. He was named one of FilterBuy’s Top 50 Health and Environmental Journalists to Follow in 2016. His work has been published by Yes! Magazine, Salon, Truthout, BillMoyers.com, Asia Times, Pressenza, and EcoWatch, among others. He volunteers with [New York City Pigeon Rescue Central](https://nycprc.org/).

**Source**: Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line**: *This article was produced by* [*Earth | Food | Life*](http://independentmediainstitute.org/earth-food-life/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags**: Animal Rights, Environment, Food, Labor, North America/United States of America,

**[Article Body:]**

The facts are clear and they are shocking: Factory farming is [unhealthy for consumers](https://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-10728/5-reasons-why-you-should-never-eat-factoryfarmed-meat.html), [dangerous for workers](https://www.onegreenplanet.org/environment/the-human-victims-of-factory-farming/), and [devastating for the environment](https://www.onegreenplanet.org/animalsandnature/factory-farming-is-killing-the-environment/), and it is the [largest cause of animal cruelty in the history of mankind](https://animalequality.org/news/why-factory-farming-is-the-largest-cause-of-animal-abuse-in-history/).

In the United States alone, nearly [10 billion land animals](https://www.humanesociety.org/all-our-fights/protect-farm-animals) are raised on factory farms and killed in slaughterhouses every single year, accounting for [99 percent of farmed animals](https://sentientmedia.org/u-s-farmed-animals-live-on-factory-farms/) in the nation. These animals are subjected to physical, psychological, and emotional cruelty on a constant basis, living in extreme confinement where they experience fear and pain daily until they are killed for their meat. The normal lifespan of a chicken is five to eight years. But on a factory farm, they live just [47 days](https://www.humanesociety.org/all-our-fights/protect-farm-animals) before they are sent to slaughter.

**Factory Farming Is Destroying the Environment**

In addition to being the main cause of animal cruelty in the world, factory farming is a primary source of environmental degradation. The industrialized meat industry accounts for [37 percent of worldwide emissions of methane](https://psci.princeton.edu/tips/2020/3/23/the-food-system-amp-climate-change), a global warming gas [84 times more potent than carbon dioxide](https://www.edf.org/climate/methane-other-important-greenhouse-gas) in the first two decades after its release. It is also responsible for [65 percent of human-made emissions of nitrous oxide](https://psci.princeton.edu/tips/2020/3/23/the-food-system-amp-climate-change)—a gas 300 times more potent than carbon dioxide—that depletes the ozone layer, which protects the Earth’s surface from the Sun’s harmful ultraviolet radiation.

Factory farming also [depletes the planet’s fresh water](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/31/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-our-water-guzzling-food-factory.html). Just a single egg takes more than 50 gallons of water to produce. A pound of chicken, 468 gallons. A gallon of milk, 880 gallons. A pound of beef, 1,800 gallons. It also requires vast tracts of land, which means the industrial meat industry is also the cause of massive deforestation around the globe, destroying ecosystems, threatening Indigenous communities and their traditional ways of life, and [endangering a host of wildlife](https://takeextinctionoffyourplate.com/how-meat-harms-wildlife). Data shows that companies in the supply chain of JBS, the world’s largest supplier of meat, are potentially responsible for the destruction of up to [124 square miles of Brazilian rainforest](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jul/02/revealed-amazon-deforestation-driven-global-greed-meat-brazil) every single year to produce beef that is exported around the globe.

**Slow Progress**

Josephine Morris, an expert in food policy and animal welfare with the [Humane Society of the United States](https://www.humanesociety.org/) (HSUS), works with the largest food companies, from fast-food chains like McDonald’s to food service firms like Sodexo, to uphold their commitments to improving the lives of animals in their supply chains. She wrote about HSUS’s [Food Industry Scorecard](https://www.humanesociety.org/resources/food-industry-scorecard), a 2019 survey of 95 companies that looked at the progress being made (or not made) in terms of their stated public promises on increasing animal welfare.

“We’ve found that some of them are trying diligently to improve the lives of animals used in their supply chain; others are lagging behind or have backtracked from their pledges altogether,” she [writes on NationofChange](https://www.nationofchange.org/2020/08/07/are-americas-biggest-food-companies-making-progress-toward-reducing-animal-suffering/). “Sodexo is more than 60 percent compliant toward its goal of using only cage-free eggs and is actively working to increase its percentage of plant-based entrees,” Morris reports. “On the other hand, Marriott (and other companies) have repeatedly failed to keep their animal welfare promises, and Subway reports no progress made toward its 2012 promise to ‘rapidly eliminate’ cruel gestation crates from its pork supply.”

**COVID-19 Exposes Reality of Factory Farming**

The coronavirus pandemic laid bare the harsh realities of factory farming, as Linda Tyler, a fellow at [Sentient Media](https://sentientmedia.org/) who covers animal welfare issues, [reported on Citizen Truth](https://citizentruth.org/covid-19-crisis-highlights-big-meat-companies-lack-of-openness/). “The COVID-19 crisis has played havoc with factory farming’s relentless raise-and-kill operations,” she writes. “Thousands of meatpacking and processing workers have been [infected with the coronavirus](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6918e3.htm), leading to the closing down of dozens of slaughterhouses. The animals destined for those slaughterhouses have had nowhere to go, and [farmers have killed millions of animals](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/19/millions-of-us-farm-animals-to-be-culled-by-suffocation-drowning-and-shooting-coronavirus), often in crude and cruel ways, including shooting, suffocation, and even heating the animals to death. Grown animals, as well as born and unborn baby animals, [have been slaughtered](https://sentientmedia.org/farmed-animals-culled-en-mass-as-covid-19-outbreaks-halt-meat-and-dairy-production/). Farmers are ill-prepared to carry out this gruesome task, and animals are suffering horribly as a result.”

In addition, factory farm workers—often undocumented immigrants—are routinely exploited by factory farm owners as a source of cheap labor and are forced to deal with dangerous working conditions: There is a [50](https://www.onegreenplanet.org/environment/the-human-victims-of-factory-farming/) [percent](https://psci.princeton.edu/tips/2020/3/23/the-food-system-amp-climate-change) [chance that a factory farm worker will be injured on the job](https://www.onegreenplanet.org/environment/the-human-victims-of-factory-farming/). No wonder U.S. factory farms, despite employing more than 500,000 workers, have one of the largest turnover rates in the nation: [up to 100](https://foodispower.org/slaughterhouse-workers/) [percent](https://psci.princeton.edu/tips/2020/3/23/the-food-system-amp-climate-change) [annually](https://foodispower.org/slaughterhouse-workers/).

**How Shareholders and Consumers Can Help**

What can be done? Well, the information gathered in the [Food Industry Scorecard](https://www.humanesociety.org/resources/food-industry-scorecard) can help consumers make decisions about which companies they want to support, and which companies they want to avoid. It can also help shareholders decide where they want to invest and—if they’ve already invested in companies that have failed on their animal welfare commitments—where they might want to apply pressure. “[Shareholders owning at least $2,000 worth of stock for at least one year can introduce a resolution](https://www.worldanimalprotection.us/blogs/shareholder-advocacy-tool-change),” writes Cameron Harsh, who manages the “Raise Pigs Right” campaign at World Animal Protection, a nonprofit. “In some cases, the submission of a resolution alone can lead to action by the company to address the issue of concern without requiring a full vote. It is in the interest of the company to avoid a public vote, and it can project a progressive image to shareholders ahead of the annual meeting.”

But the best thing we can all do is to reduce—or better yet, eliminate—our meat intake. For each person who chooses to switch to a meat-free diet, an estimated [100 animals per year could be spared a terrible fate](https://www.humanesociety.org/all-our-fights/protect-farm-animals). In addition to leaving animal cruelty and the environmental destruction caused by the meat industry off their plates, eaters who move to plant-based diets can experience a wide array of health benefits. Rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes, plant-based diets are full of fiber, packed with vitamins and minerals, low in calories and saturated fat, and cholesterol-free. That translates to [better health on multiple fronts](https://www.pcrm.org/good-nutrition/plant-based-diets): It can reduce the risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, certain types of cancer, and other major illnesses, including Alzheimer’s disease and other cognitive conditions. Many people who have transitioned to a plant-based diet “report bigger fitness payoffs, more energy, reduced inflammation, and better health outcomes after making the switch,” [reports](https://www.forksoverknives.com/how-tos/plant-based-primer-beginners-guide-starting-plant-based-diet/) Forks Over Knives.

It won’t be easy to transform the world’s food systems from animal to plants, but as Richard Trethowan, the director of the IA Watson Research Center at the University of Sydney’s Narrabri [Plant Breeding Institute](https://www.sydney.edu.au/science/our-research/research-centres/plant-breeding-institute.html), [writes](https://theconversation.com/itll-be-hard-but-we-can-feed-the-world-with-plant-protein-121816) in the Conversation, we can feed the human population with plant protein—without increasing the amount of farmland: “governments around the world must turn away from heavily [subsidized] but protein-poor cereals, and aggressively pursue legume production.”

On September 28, 2022, New York City Mayor Eric Adams [announced](https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/705-22/mayor-adams-nyc-h-h-ceo-katz-successful-rollout-expansion-plant-based-meals-as) that NYC Health + Hospitals (NYC H+H), which operates the public hospitals and clinics in New York City as a public benefit corporation, that “culturally diverse plant-based meals are now the primary dinner options for inpatients” at NYC H+H hospitals, which serves about 3 million meals for lunch and dinner every year. The move makes New York City the first U.S. municipality to shift to a plant-based default across an entire public institution—in this case, its hospitals.

“When it comes to preventing diet-related chronic disease, there is a growing recognition that it’s not our DNA—it’s our dinner,” [said](https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/705-22/mayor-adams-nyc-h-h-ceo-katz-successful-rollout-expansion-plant-based-meals-as) Mayor Adams. “Since January [2022], we have introduced Plant-Powered Fridays into schools, introduced fresh produce into the nation’s only municipal emergency food system, and expanded Plant-Based Lifestyle Medicine Clinics to public hospitals across all five boroughs. Now, we are proud to announce the successful rollout and expansion of default plant-based lunch and dinner options at all H+H sites. This transformative program is already changing lives, empowering patients to take control of their own health and further cementing New York City as a leader in preventive medicine.”

**Legislation**

Some lawmakers are taking action. In 2023, Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) re-introduced federal legislation that would ban large-scale factory farming in the United States over the following two decades of the bill’s passage. SB 271, the [Farm System Reform Act](https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/271?s=1&r=60), seeks to place a moratorium on large-scale factory farming. It would also strengthen the Packers and Stockyards Act of 1921 to require country-of-origin labeling on beef, pork, and dairy products. It has been co-sponsored by Sens. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), and Ed Markey (D-MA). Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA) is also supporting the effort, having re-introduced [companion legislation](https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/797), HR 797, to the House of Representatives.

“Our food system was not broken by the pandemic and it was not broken by independent family farmers. It was broken by large, multinational corporations like Tyson, Smithfield, and JBS that, because of their buying power and size, have undue influence over the marketplace and over public policy,” Booker [said](https://www.booker.senate.gov/news/press/as-pandemic-exposes-major-weaknesses-in-meatpacking-industry-sen-warren-rep-khanna-cosponsor-sen-bookers-farm-system-reform-act-to-fix-broken-system). “That undue influence was on full display with President Trump’s recent executive order prioritizing meatpacker profits over the health and safety of workers.”

In 2023, ASPCA launched a [public petition](https://www.onegreenplanet.org/news/petition-ban-factory-farming-in-the-u-s/) to give Americans a chance to lodge their support of the Farm System Reform Act. In addition to signing this petition, you can contact your senators and representatives to urge them to co-sponsor these bills. Animals trapped in our broken, inhumane food system don’t have a voice. So it’s up to all of us to speak on their behalf. Together, we can move the country to a healthier, more humane future. As Gandhi—who espoused a total commitment to nonviolence—wisely observed, “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.”