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ROUND-UP OF MAJOR BLOGS

AIR

July 15, 2010
Leslie HatfieldSenior editor, GRACE
Posted: July 14, 2010 03:06 PM

Factory vs. Sustainable Pork Production: Two Videos, One Case for Transparency (*Huffington Post*)

Originally published at Ecocentric.
Not many people would actually choose to get near a concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO). In fact, lots of people spend lots of time trying to prevent such outfits from being built in their communities. But last fall, I jumped at the opportunity to visit a hog confinement in Iowa, as did several dozen other food activists, because such a glimpse into the secretive world of factory farming is rarer than a heritage breed pork chop in your average supermarket (which is to say, quite rare).

So I shot a few moments of my glimpse behind the plastic "curtain," which you can watch in this video.

We were not alone in our curiosity. Organizations like the Humane Society have long used undercover animal rights activists to document inhumane practices in CAFOs, author Jonathon Safran Foer sneaked into one for his book, Eating Animals, and in his oft-cited bestseller, The Omnivore's Dilemma, Michael Pollan suggests that if windows were installed in feedlots and slaughterhouses, the problems with contemporary meat production would be largely solved. Famed animal behaviorist Dr. Temple Grandin, too, made the case last spring for transparency in the form of on-site video cameras.

Even Blake Hurst, the infamous agribusiness cheerleader, commodity farmer and vice president of the Missouri Farm Bureau, suggested in a NY Times Room for Debate essay on localized meat production that a "slaughterhouse in every village" would lead to greater public understanding of industrial food production, although I can only assume his intention here was quite different than Pollan's or Grandin's. On the other hand, Shauna Ahern of Pork, Knife and Spoon, a mouth-watering blog sponsored by The National Pork Board, wrote a very sympathetic post last month about her visit to a "pig farm" that she only later supposedly realized was a "CAFO," the owner of which refused to allow her to document any of the animals or their dwellings.

I agree with Pollan and Grandin -- in livestock agriculture, as in most anything, transparency is the order of the day. If I'm going to eat something -- especially an animal product -- I want to know as much as I can about where it came from, what it ate, how it was treated, whether its waste was dealt with in an environmentally responsible manner, etc.

That said, because of the controversial nature of industrial livestock production and out of respect for a CAFO owner open enough to show it, I'll keep the identifying details of the operation I visited close. Basically though, it fit the EPA's definition of a large CAFO, but at 16,000 hogs (housed in four different buildings -- about the same size as the one Ahern saw) it was on the quite small side of large. This PDF shows the EPA's definition of CAFOs by species, but note that sizes are "floors" as opposed to "ceilings," and that some of the nation's largest CAFOs move over a million animals a year.

This confinement was part of a larger corn and soy operation. The owner did not tell us how many acres he was cultivating, but I got the impression that it was in the tens of thousands. He used some of the waste created by his hogs to fertilize his fields, which made sense back in the day when the amounts of waste created by a herd of animals corresponded to the number of acres to which it was applied, but given the vast quantities produced by large scale confinements, the waste is unmanageable and as such a major liability, one that operators like the one I talked to are left to shoulder on their own while the companies they contract out to reap the lion's share of the profits (see page 6 of the Pew Charitable Trusts' and Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's 2008 report [large PDF]).

Speaking of waste, I'd heard a lot about the stench raised by CAFOs, and I must say that although it definitely didn't smell good, neither did it blow me over the way I expected. But stink is the least of the problems with the massive quantities of waste created at such facilities, most of which feature manure "lagoons" (this one was hidden beneath the building, which likely helped mask the smell -- the fact that it was snowing that day also probably helped -- I would imagine that it could get pretty ugly under the Midwest sun this time of year). Neighbors of CAFOs -- and workers, too -- have long reported adverse health effects like increased respiratory ailments (PDF) from air pollution, and mismanagement of waste was suspected to have been the cause of H1N1 virus.

Just as the stench didn't knock me down, neither did the sight of so many hogs housed so tightly together devastate me emotionally, even though I adore pigs and know how smart they are and I would never, ever allow my dog to be in a situation like that.

A few months after I visited the CAFO, I watched the film Our Daily Bread, a commentary-free film that documents several modern food production facilities. Thinking myself relatively hardened by years of looking at food issues, I turned it on while I ate dinner. I was sort of half-watching when it got to the part where the baby chicks were being de-beaked -- so I'd been watching and eating for awhile before I realized what was going on, at which point I nearly choked on my (veggie) taco. Visiting the CAFO was like that -- at first blush, not the most pleasant place to be but also not shockingly horrible, unless you know what you're looking at (I must also note that there are much worse CAFOs -- there are many videos that document them -- and it makes sense that the guy who would let us in to see would rate among the better owners).

All the same, the farm in the video below is another animal completely, one with husbandry methods that are selling points, not liabilities. Note that the little piggies in that video still had tails and ran free in the pasture. Pasture-raising is not only a more humane method of animal husbandry, but a healthier one, too - tightly confined animals often get each other sick and so, many CAFO operators feed them regular doses of antibiotics, a practice that has been linked to the flailing efficacy of antibiotics and a steady increase in MRSA infections and as a result, has come under scrutiny from Congress.

Meat, how it's produced and whether or not a person eats it is, at least in this society, a vastly touchy subject, one that has divided families in CAFO country and I suspect, spoiled many a holiday. Back when I was vegetarian, Thanksgiving (and all the other meat-centric holidays, which most of them, if you think about it, are) was a stress-inducing event for me as well as for my mother, who did her best to accommodate but flat out didn't know how to cook without meat. I always felt like she thought I was judging her, and that my reluctance to indulge in the main dish hovered over the room like a foul smell, souring my family's enjoyment by forcing them, however briefly, to consider why I chose to abstain.

And so, I mostly bit my tongue unless a relative asked about my vegetarian diet, just as I didn't volunteer my opinions to the CAFO owner when I met him, which got me to thinking: Why is it so hard to have these conversations? Does it spring from an old-time politeness, where a guest doesn't ask critical questions of the hosts' food? Or is it that industry public relations campaigns have lulled most of us into believing what we want to -- that all of our meat is still of the video #2 variety, and that people believe that because they just don't want to know?

Questions about industry wool-pulling and willful ignorance aside -- because in the end, it doesn't matter much -- my colleague Chris Hunt points out that ultimate transparency is not even necessarily the point, if government agencies do their jobs and enact meaningful regulations on the meat industry. But I would argue that greater transparency is the only thing that will get consumers to demand such toothy regulations.

If the rise in popularity of books like Pollan's and Safran Foer's is any indication, perhaps we are, as a society, heading in the direction of at least speaking frankly about our food and the consequences of its production, demanding products that don't have such grievous impacts on our public and environmental health, supporting farmers as they transition back to more traditional, sustainable and humane methods and perhaps most importantly, turning the critical eye inward and asking ourselves the hard questions about what we are comfortable about putting in our bodies and allowing to happen in our communities.

ASBESTOS

Calif may dump 'state rock' that contains asbestos (*Huffington Post*)

TREVOR HUNNICUTT | July 15, 2010 05:19 AM
SACRAMENTO, Calif. — In 1965, California lawmakers named serpentine the state rock because it symbolized the Gold Rush years and contained a mineral being put to myriad industrial uses.

Nearly half a century later, attitudes toward that mineral – asbestos – have changed, and one state lawmaker wants serpentine stripped of its status.

Health authorities say asbestos, which is no longer mined in the U.S., can cause an incurable cancer called mesothelioma as well as other diseases when its fibers are inhaled.

"This is a question of health and public awareness," said Democratic state Sen. Gloria Romero of Los Angeles, who proposed the bill. "We know that California has the highest rates of mesothelioma deaths in the nation and we don't think it's appropriate to be celebrating as the state rock something which contains asbestos."

Romero's proposal to remove serpentinite, as the jade-green rock is formally known, as the state rock has hit a wall of opposition from geologists and industry advocates. Contending the rock is being unfairly maligned, they have started a social-media crusade on Twitter and blogs to stop the proposal.

"The rock is an ideal symbol for our state," said Garry Hayes, a Modesto Community College geology teacher who was among the first to protest the bill online. "The asbestos issue is there, but it's a small part of what serpentine is."

Some opponents have accused trial lawyers of pushing Romero's plan so they can pursue a whole new type of lawsuit by plaintiffs alleging their health was damaged when they were exposed to naturally occurring asbestos in serpentine found on property throughout the Sierra Nevada foothills and 42 of California's 58 counties.

Serpentine is found throughout the country but is particularly plentiful in the same places where gold was found in California. In the 1960s, it was increasingly mined for its asbestos that was often was used in construction.

The rock was crushed or broken to release the asbestos minerals' durable and fire-resistant fibers, which were used in household appliances, construction materials and other goods.

Lawmakers hoped the designation would help expand the then-$6 million California asbestos industry.

Just how big of a problem the rock poses today is being debated. Geologists say not all serpentine rocks contain asbestos, and chrysotile, the type found most frequently, is not as dangerous as other types.

The World Health Organization has said that all types of asbestos, including those in the air from natural sources, cause cancer. But the Environmental Protection Agency says naturally occurring asbestos that remains undisturbed in the ground presents no risk.

Dr. Marc B. Schenker, a University of California, Davis, public health sciences professor who has studied the issue, said he supports the proposed law to strip serpentine of its status as state rock.

"On the other hand," he said, "I wish the efforts were being put into improving public health and preventing disease due to environmental exposure rather than these symbolic gestures."

Residents of the Sierra foothills are not entirely convinced of the risk.

"To declare naturally occurring asbestos as a danger and a health hazard has not been proven," said John Knight, a county supervisor who represents unincorporated El Dorado Hills. "We should not create a hysteria about something that's not scientifically proven."

The town was the subject of a 2005 study by the EPA that showed elevated levels of asbestos in the air.

About 2,500 Americans die from mesothelioma every year, according to statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Dr. Heather Wakelee, a physician at the Stanford Cancer Center, said most of those cases are connected to occupational exposure, and relatively few are people who were exposed to naturally occurring asbestos.

The state Senate has approved the proposed law, and it is working its way through the Assembly. Since it has been amended, it would need approval from the Senate again.

If the bill becomes law, some think its impact will be more than symbolic.

"The state is already being hit with lawyers moving here to sue over asbestos that's been used in manufactured products," said John H. Sullivan, president of the Civil Justice Association of California, which advocates tort reform. "I believe that these and other lawyers would feel they've struck gold if they can also bring lawsuits over naturally occurring asbestos."

But many lawyers dismissed that claim.

"It's just not true, no matter how many times other people say it is," said J.G. Preston, a spokesman for Consumer Attorneys of California. "The Civil Justice Association of California ... planted this seed because it's in their interest to make trial lawyers look greedy and foolish."

The group's political action committee has donated $14,700 to Sen. Romero's political campaigns since 2000, state records show.

Ben DuBose, whose Dallas-based law firm pursues asbestos-related cases, said he didn't think the law would open up new avenues for litigation. He added, however, that it might help show there's a worldwide consensus about the health danger of naturally occurring asbestos.

Asbestos litigation has been a major business for lawyers since the 1960s. Lawyers seeking clients with mesothelioma have become a fixture on late-night television advertisements in California.

Defendants and insurers have paid out more than $70 billion in asbestos litigation since lawsuits began, according to a 2005 study by the nonpartisan RAND Institute for Civil Justice. The average jury award for a mesothelioma victim is around $4 million.

Aides from Sen. Romero's office said language in the bill was developed in consultation with the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization, a California group with significant funding from law firms that specialize in asbestos litigation.

But Romero said she took the lead in crafting the bill and moving it forward.

"It's not a giveaway to the trial lawyers," she said.

BP SPILL

Live From the Gulf: A Rallying Song for America (Heritage)

Posted By Rory Cooper On July 14, 2010 @ 12:30 pm In Energy and Environment, Ongoing Priorities | No Comments

As President Obama's Oil Spill Commission met in New Orleans, Louisiana yesterday, they were met with an unexpected surprise. Drew Landry, a Lafayette native and singer-songwriter treated the commission to a rallying cry for the people of the Gulf, and some wise advice.

The Huffington Post reports [1]: ""We definitely need other solutions, going green — whatever it takes, man," Landry said, addressing commission co-chair Bob Graham, a former Democratic senator from Florida. "We've got nothing. We don't want to be a welfare state. There's no point in that. We're hardworking people."

Landry continued [1]: “It feels like BP is in control of this deal, and the Coast Guard does what they want, you know, the press can’t be around. But more importantly, it feels like the people don’t have a voice in this this…It just sucks. Let’s just do the right damn thing. It shouldn’t be this hard. It shouldn’t take a committee to listen to people.”

Landry raises some important points. He asked the commission why volunteers who are ready and able to help are being turned away. He reminded them that “we’re not ready for hurricane.” He asked why the press is being stopped from reporting the story. But most importantly, he gave the commissioners sage advice [1]: “It shouldn’t be about a policy change. It should be about what makes the most sense, how are we going to get these people…keep people working.”

As Heritage’s Robert Bluey reported last night [2], the Commissioners are already waking up to the unnecessary and disastrous consequences of President Obama’s drilling moratorium. Commissioner, and former EPA chief, William Reilly told the New Orleans Times-Picayune: ““I come to this experience with a much greater sense of the economic dislocation being experienced here than I had three days ago…It’s not clear for me why it should take so long to reassure oneself about [safety] considerations on those rigs.”

ENERGY

July 15, 2010

George LakoffAuthor, The Political Mind, Moral Politics, Don't Think of an Elephant!
Posted: July 15, 2010 09:08 AM

Double Dividend: Make Money by Saving Nature (*Huffington Post*)

Saving nature is the central issue. Carbon fuels destroy nature. The Gulf Death Gusher is the most visible sign. But signs are everywhere. Overall global warming increases hurricanes and floods, destroys habitats for plants, fish, birds, and ground animals, spreads deserts, causes deadly waves, and destroys glaciers and our polar ice caps. The use of carbon fuels has been destroying nature. Our job now is to save it.

Interestingly, there is a short, 39-page bill before the Senate that would allow us to save nature and get paid substantially for doing it. It is the CLEAR bill, first suggested by Peter Barnes, and introduced by Maria Cantwell (D-WA) and Susan Collins (R-ME). It is simple, it works, and it pays you!

The principle behind it is this: We US citizens own the air over the US equally. Carbon-fuel sellers are dumping pollution in our air, not just poisoning the air, but destroying nature. At least they should pay for permits to dump, poison, and destroy, and should be forced year-by-year to stop. Who should the sellers pay for permits? All of us, the citizens who live here, should be paid

handsomely. And there should be predictably fewer permits every year, till the practice ends or reaches tolerable levels.

Here's how cap-and-cash works. Carbon-fuel profiteers introduce polluting fuels at only 2,000 distribution points in the US. The EPA already monitors how much polluting fuel each seller distributes. The CLEAR Act requires sellers to compete at auction each year to buy pollution-permits to sell their poisonous fuel, with a minimum and maximum price per permit set each year. Every year, for 40 years, the number of permits is reduced, until the 80% of the carbon pollution has been eliminated.

Who gets the permit money? You do. The money goes into a trust. Twenty-five percent goes to developing nonpolluting fuels and mitigating existing environmental disasters. Most of it -- seventy-five percent -- is distributed equally to all citizen-residents every month via electronic bank transfers. A family of four, the first year would get between $1,000 and $1,500, and the amount would go up each year. Why? The law of supply and demand. As there are fewer permits to sell fuel, and as the air gets cleaner, the price rises and you get more cash.

We all get a double dividend: cleaner air while saving nature and a significant cash dividend for owning the air. The hundreds of billions of dollars going to citizens will be spent all over the country and will create jobs. Everyone wins except the polluting fuels companies -- the BP's of the world.

The Criteria for Success

Administratively Simple: It eliminates bureaucracy, and it brings credibility and transparency. It just requires computer programs. It can be publicly checked to see if it is working. There are no hidden deals or details.

Market-driven without government: The trust will be outside of government. Market mechanisms will determine the value of the permits and, hence, the money paid to citizens.

Gradual Transition: There would be no short-term market disruption. The transition would be gradual.

Market-driven and convenient: Businesses that use carbon fuels will not have to monitor their pollution. They will have a market-based incentive to switch gradually to non-polluting fuels.

Predictable: Business leaders will be able to plan for the future with no huge rush.

Encourages Entrepreneurship: It will create incentives for innovation and new energy industries.

Job-Creating: The cash going into new energy industries and being spent all over the country will create jobs.

The Opposite of Taxation

Anti-tax: The CLEAR bill puts money into the pockets of most citizens instead of taking money out.

Saves money: The cost of polluting fuels will rise temporarily, while you get cash. Who gets more, you or the oil and coal companies that raise their prices?

You will, unless you're rich and can afford it! The richer you are, the more energy you use. If you are among the seventy percent of citizens in the lower and middle income brackets, you will get more in payments from the CLEAR bill than you will pay for increases in fuel prices.

Why will carbon fuel prices eventually fall? The prices depend on demand. Two factors will reduce demand over time.

First, the availability of non-carbon fuels. The CLEAR bill's 25% will help develop non-carbon alternatives, which will reduce demand.

Second, investment in not-needing-carbon-fuels through, say, insulation and energy-efficiency, will reduce demand cumulatively. A barrel of oil or ton of coal saved the first year through insulation or energy efficiency will also be saved year-after-year. This will cumulatively reduce demand for carbon fuels.

Double job-creation: Eliminating the need, and hence the demand for carbon-polluting fuels will create jobs in two ways. First, new energy and energy-efficiency industries will need employees. Second, money saved on energy can be invested in, or spent on, enterprises that will create jobs. Both are market mechanisms. The jobs will mostly be in the private sector.

Politically Achievable: Putting money in the pockets of people who will spend it will be politically popular, as will job creation.

Who Loses?

Any legislation that greatly reduces the use of carbon fuels -- whether the CLEAR bill or the current cap-and-trade bills -- will create "losers."

The carbon-polluting industries -- the BP's of the world -- will lose, unless they invest their vast profits in non-polluting energy and in energy-efficiency: in industries that lower or eliminate the need for energy use. Those industries that are committed to the continued destruction of nature should lose, unless they change their commitment to saving nature.

The pollution dumping industries (e.g., electric power companies) will no longer be able to save money by not cleaning up their pollution and dumping it in our air instead. Having to switch to nonpolluting energy or pay more for polluting energy will count as a "loss," since they will make less short-term profit. In the long run, if they make the switch to nonpolluting energy and energy

efficiency, those profits will be made up. But the short-term "losses" are what will count to investors.

Right-wing politicians, supported by those industries, will also lose if they cannot deliver to their nature-destroying supporters a defeat of any nature-saving legislation. Those politicians will also lose because their anti-environmental ideology, which says that nature is to be indefinitely exploited for profit, will be defeated.

The Lies

Not surprisingly, those who stand to lose are spreading lies about carbon-cutting legislation.

The Tax Lie: Suppose there was a direct tax on carbon. At the gas pump, the gas companies would list this as a tax and add it to the price of gas at the pump. Now suppose that nature-saving legislation results in a sort-term rise in gas prices because oil companies want to preserve their previously astronomical level of profits. In both cases, the price of gas would rise. So, the argument goes, nature-saving legislation has the same result as a tax, and therefore it is a tax.

In the case of the CLEAR bill, the lie would be clear: Seventy percent of the population would be making more than enough extra money to offset the rise in prices. But what is not said, is that the prices at the pump would not rise if the oil companies made ordinary profits rather than excessive profits. The rise at the pump would, to a large extent, come from making sure that wealthy oil executives and investors insisting on outrageously high profits.

Also not figured in is the cost of continuing to destroy nature indefinitely into the future: the costs of more oil spills; more mountain tops blown into streams; of more glacial sources of water as glaciers and snowcaps melt; of more and more hurricanes, floods, and fires; of the loss of arable land to the spread of deserts; of the loss of fish and forests -- and most of all, the cost of the quality of life on earth.

At the heart of the Tax Lie is the failure to figure in systemic costs, the real costs -- both financial costs, life costs, and quality of life costs -- and the failure to count greed.

The Job Lie: As we have seen the CLEAR bill would create jobs, as would any legislation seriously reducing or ending the use of polluting fuels. A certain number of jobs would indeed be lost gradually in the nature-destroying industries as demand for polluting fuels declined, but those would more than be made up for as nature-saving fuels and nature-saving energy efficiencies more than made up for the jobs lost.

The Simple Truths

We need to save nature, not destroy it. We can start to do so while making money, stimulating the economy, and creating jobs.

Tell everyone you know about the Clear Act.

TOXICS

July 15, 2010
Patricia J. BeattiePosted: July 14, 2010 01:34 PM

Safer Chemicals Policy Reform Needs to Advance Supply Chain Transparency (*Huffington Post*)

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Read More: Consumer Protection , Toxic Chemicals , Toxic Waste , Toxins , Green News
It seems that a week rarely passes by without news of yet another toxic chemical being found in a consumer product. Whether it's cadmium on a drinking glass, lead in a toy or bisphenol A in a baby bottle, I would think that consumers would be wondering "Why is this happening? What are manufacturers thinking, putting these substances in their products?"

Surprisingly many manufacturers simply don't know the chemicals in their products. Product manufacturers -- especially of products like computers, building products and automobiles -- often don't know the chemicals contained in the materials they use in their products. Extracting chemical ingredient information from complex supply chains is a challenging task that few companies dare to undertake.

Government support for addressing this problem is absent: no state or federal regulation requires disclosing chemical ingredients in products we commonly buy and use everyday (with the notable exception of products regulated by the Food and Drug Administration). The federal law that is supposed to manage the nation's industrial chemicals has not been updated in 34 years, leaving manufacturers unaware of the potential hazards posed by many of the chemicals they rely on.

Since the mid-1980's, chemical producers have been required by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to provide Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDSs) to their customers on chemical-intensive products to protect workers from the adverse effects of exposure to these substances. MSDSs provide chemical ingredient and health and safety information for the hazardous ingredients. But once these chemicals are incorporated into an article (such as a solid material like plastic), the flow of information stops. This disconnect is due to the thinking that once a chemical is incorporated into a product or bound into a matrix, there is no longer potential for exposure. In many cases, this may be true, but often the manufacturer may not know how the product will be used by the final consumer or how the product will be disposed of at the end of its useful life.

With Congress prepared to reform the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) of 1976, we now have a chance to address chemical ingredient transparency across the supply chain. Over the past 30 years, the science available to evaluate the health and environmental impacts of chemicals has advanced greatly along with consumer expectations for safer chemicals and products. The

proposals moving through Congress require a minimum data set on all new and existing chemicals and would have the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) determine safe levels based on hazard, exposure and use information. But how will the EPA make these determinations if the downstream users of chemicals and article manufacturers don't have information on the chemicals in their products? And how can manufacturers of articles, consumer products and retailers make informed decisions on the appropriateness of a particular chemical in their product if there is no requirement for them to have this information?

This sharing of chemical information through the supply chain is not new -- any company doing business in the European Union is required to communicate chemical information up and down the supply chain and similar requirements are being considered in many other countries.

Business-to-business communication of chemical-level information down the supply chain through to article and end-product manufacturers is critical for making informed decisions on the health and environmental impacts of the products used by Americans. Having this information during the design stage of the product allows the manufacturer to thoroughly understand and evaluate the full cost of doing business and strategically manage those costs, taking into consideration potential substance restrictions around the world and costs for regulatory compliance, liability and risks. With this information, manufacturers of articles and consumer products would then have the ability to inform consumers if their products contain particular chemicals of concern.

Improving supply chain communication and chemical information sharing will allow for businesses to make informed and cost-effective decisions about the chemicals incorporated into their products, which, will then allow for communication to consumers and end product users.

Dr. Patricia Beattie is a board-certified toxicologist with extensive experience managing chemicals in complex supply chains. She is now Vice President at SciVera, Inc., and also Principal at the independent consulting firm, Arcalis Scientific, LLC.