

Report spots risks in animal farm practices

Food production takes too big a toll, it says

By Elizabeth Weise
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The way America produces meat, milk and eggs is unsustainable, creates significant risks to public health from antibiotic resistance and disease, damages the environment and unnecessarily harms animals, a report released Tuesday says.

Representing two years of research by the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, the report suggests ways to safeguard the safety and stability of U.S. meat, milk and egg production. A joint project of the non-profit Pew Charitable Trusts and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, it focuses on problems caused by a nationwide move to large, industrial-style animal-feeding facilities.

Making the necessary changes to the system that puts food on America's tables doesn't mean making meat, milk and eggs so expensive that people can't afford to eat, says panel chairman John Carlin of Kansas State University.

"We're talking pennies. And when you factor in the positives from the standpoint of public health and the environment, it would actually save us money," he says.

Meat, milk and eggs have become cheaper in the years since the rise of industrial animal farms. But those methods have come at a cost, the report says. They include:

- The use of low levels of antibiotics in animal feed to boost growth rather than to fight actual disease. This increases the possibility that antibiotic-resistant strains of disease will surface in animals and people. The report calls for restrictions on the use of drugs in the raising of animals that will enter the food supply. It also seeks improved monitoring of the food supply to detect the antibiotic-resistant microbes.

- Large, confined feeding operations that bring together tens of thousands of chickens, pigs or cattle. These produce enormous amounts of animal waste that can foul water supplies, spread disease and cause respiratory problems, including higher asthma rates in people working and living nearby.

New research is needed to find ways to deal with the large quantities of concentrated animal waste generated by these facilities, the report says.

- The report calls for a 10-year phaseout of troubling animal-farming practices, including the use of crates that keep pregnant sows from turning around and severely restrict sows' movements while nursing, small battery cages for laying hens, the force-feeding of geese or duck to produce foie gras (which is their fattened livers) and cutting the tails of dairy cattle.

Consumers can play an important part by asking for more information about how the animals are raised and slaughtered, Carlin says. "The food retail industry will respond when consumers' expectations change," he says.

Kay Johnson Smith of the Animal Agriculture Alliance in Arlington, Va., said the report unfairly targeted large animal operations. "The industry is very progressive in looking at how do we do things better," she says. Producers are already starting to make changes, "so why do we need policy to make those changes?" Forcing change will result only in more expensive food, she says.