



## From Ecological Justice and the Right to Health: A Virtual Panel May 19, 2022

### Dr. Elan Abrell's Comments on the Harmful Impacts of the Meat Packing Industry

A report released October 27, 2021, by the US House of Representatives Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus—based on data from five of the largest meatpacking conglomerates—found that COVID-19 deaths and infections among slaughterhouse workers were up to three times higher than previously thought; specifically, 59,000 meatpacking workers were infected, and at least 269 meatpacking workers lost their lives to the coronavirus between approximately March 1, 2020 and February 1, 2021.

It also found that meatpacking employers prioritized profits and production over worker safety, that the government agencies charged with protecting these workers failed to do so, and that minority workers were disproportionately impacted.

Many factors contributed to this public health disaster, but we're focusing on an especially significant one today: the long history of failed oversight of the animal slaughter industry in the United States.

Beyond its contributions to the spread of COVID-19 in slaughterhouses, this failure negatively affects workers, animals, and the environment in multiple other ways.

I'll highlight some of the significant ways that the inadequacies of the current regulatory system contribute to dangerous conditions for slaughterhouse workers, environmental degradation, and severe animal suffering.

### **Slaughterhouses are incredibly dangerous places to work.**

Slaughterhouse workers work elbow to elbow, engaged in fast, repetitive movements with sharp tools. Reports of amputations and hospitalizations are high.

As the National Employment Law Project recently noted, according to self-reported industry data—which is recognized to be an undercount—“meat and poultry workers are injured at rates on average 50 percent higher than all other workers in the private sector, with injury rates in red meat plants running almost twice as high.”

Injuries are not only more prevalent—they are also more severe, even when compared to other dangerous industries.

The industry response to the pandemic is again illustrative of the industry's general disregard for worker safety.

Despite the high risks posed to workers and their communities, slaughterhouses resisted providing even the most basic protections during the early months of the pandemic.

A *Washington Post* investigation found that three of the largest meat processors in the United States “failed to provide protective gear to all workers, and some employees say they were told to continue working in crowded plants even while sick.”

The government agencies that are supposed to protect workers from these harms failed to do so; worse, in some instances they actively facilitated harms. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) denied an emergency petition to protect slaughterhouse workers and drastically reduced inspections, refusing to inspect slaughterhouses even in the face of repeated, serious COVID-19-related complaints.

Meanwhile, the CDC softened safety recommendations in response to industry pressure.

### **Slaughterhouses also inflict serious harm to the environment.**

Slaughter is a resource-intensive, waste-extensive business. Furthermore, like its impact on workers, its environmental impacts are disproportionately borne by low-income communities, particularly communities of color.

Federal data show that almost half of the slaughterhouses in the United States “are in communities with more than 30 percent of their residents living beneath the poverty line (more than twice the national level),” and a third “are in places where at least 30 percent of the residents are people of color.”

**Slaughterhouses in the United States use billions of gallons of water annually, often discarding the used, polluted water directly into waterways.**

Slaughter pollutants also enter drinking water supplies via runoff and groundwater seepage from agricultural fields where slaughter facilities frequently spray their waste, resulting in a host of issues, including asthma attacks, autoimmune disorders, bacterial infections, birth defects, cognitive impairment in children, cancer, gastrointestinal problems, and miscarriages.

These wastewater pollutants also cause algal blooms and “dead zones” in bodies of water. These are both fatal to aquatic life and dangerous to human health.

**Slaughterhouses also create large amounts of air pollution** that can cause serious health problems and contributes to climate change.

Nonetheless, the USDA refuses to consider the environmental impacts of its slaughterhouse policies.

And many slaughterhouses routinely violate even lax federal environmental standards with impunity. In the very few cases where fines were imposed, they were a miniscule fraction of the potential penalties, making them merely an acceptable cost of doing business for the slaughterhouse.

**But the most immediate and perhaps worst suffering caused by slaughterhouses is inflicted on the animals themselves.**

The Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (HMSA) mandates that slaughterhouses handle and kill livestock “humanely.” However, the USDA has interpreted this law to apply only to mammals, thus excluding birds—the vast majority of land animals killed for food—from even these basic protections.

The agency purports to require humane handling and slaughter of birds under the Poultry Products Inspection Act, but its stated policy is to take action only if inhumane handling or slaughter rises to the level of “a process control issue.”

This means that the USDA does not require humane treatment on a “bird-by-bird” basis and considers enforcement only if there is an “ongoing pattern or trend of” inhumane handling or slaughter.

As a result, slaughterhouses have been repeatedly documented throwing and hitting chickens, even ripping their bodies from their legs, as well as allowing fully conscious chickens to enter scald tanks intended to remove feathers from dead birds.

These birds—about a million of them annually, according to USDA data—die from scalding or asphyxiation. All of this, without enforcement actions from the USDA.

Despite the HMSA, mammals also experience severe suffering at slaughterhouses.

This includes being fully conscious when having their throats slit, when entering scald tanks, and even when being dismembered.

The USDA’s own Office of Inspector General has repeatedly condemned the agency’s poor enforcement of the HMSA, concluding that it “lacks assurance that inspectors working at slaughter establishments are ensuring that animals are humanely treated.”