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Spy Cams Show What the Pork Industry Tries to Hide

Feb. 4, 2023 4 MIN READ



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The hog industry hails the gas chambers in which pigs are prepared for slaughter as “animal friendly,” “stress free” and “painless.” That would be a good thing, since on average, four pigs are slaughtered each second in the United States.

But a California activist recently sneaked into a slaughterhouse at night and installed spy cams inside a gas chamber to record this supposedly humane process. The resulting videos are horrifying: They show the pigs squealing desperately, thrashing about and gasping for air before eventually succumbing.

“Everyone’s been lied to,” the activist, Raven Deerbrook, said. “It’s a massive consumer fraud.”

She may have a point. These gas chambers, which use carbon dioxide to render pigs unconscious, are how “animal friendly” modern meat plants across North America and Europe often prepare hogs to have their throats slit.

Deerbrook, a photographer who volunteers with the animal rights group Direct Action Everywhere, had been trying for years to get such footage. Finally, last October, with inside help, she managed to sneak into a California slaughterhouse owned by Smithfield Foods, the giant meat packing company.

It was night, and Deerbrook said she wore a fake uniform and badge. She opened an access hatch in the floor and climbed down a metal ladder 26 feet to the floor of the gas chamber. Carbon dioxide is heavier than air, so the gas chambers are below ground.

Deerbrook installed three spy cams and linked them to a cellphone hot spot that she left behind so they could transmit footage. Entering the gas chamber was risky, and she said she was almost overcome by residual carbon dioxide, even though the chamber wasn't in operation.

"I felt a breathlessness and began gulping for air," she said. "No matter how hard I was breathing, I was not getting air. It felt as if I was holding my breath, but I wasn't. It filled me with a primal fear, like drowning."

When the factory started operation in the morning, she sat in her cheap hotel room nearby and watched the live footage come in on her cellphone — and then she wept.

"I went into the bathroom and started crying and shaking uncontrollably," she recalled. "I felt so helpless."

Deerbrook and Direct Action shared the videos with Wired magazine and posted them on a new website, StopGasChambers.org.

The hog industry insists that the process is humane, so watch this video clip and decide for yourself. (Caution: The footage is graphic.)

What's troubles me most is that this doesn't seem to be one bad operation with faulty equipment. Rather, the video seems to capture how hogs are routinely slaughtered every second in America and Europe.

Smithfield executives declined to be interviewed, but in brief emails the company didn't assert that anything had gone wrong. Rather, the company put out a statement saying that carbon dioxide stunning is accepted as humane by the Agriculture Department and the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Industry groups referred me to Jason McAlister, the president of a company that works with agribusiness on animal welfare. He told me that the videos showed the system working properly, rendering animals unconscious in 10 to 17 seconds after breathing in the gas. He said that what one sees after that is involuntary jerking after animals are unconscious.

Jim Reynolds, a large-animal veterinarian and professor at Western University of Health Sciences, told me that was flatly wrong. He said that the videos show some pigs squealing and conscious for 40 seconds or more after being exposed to the gas.

“It was horrible cruelty to the pigs inside the chambers,” Jim Reynolds told me. “It’s a violation of federal law.”

Reynolds is one of 90 veterinarians who signed an open letter saying that the process shown in the videos probably violates federal law on humane slaughter.

One fair point the industry makes is that other methods of stunning are also flawed. Electrocution, often used at smaller slaughterhouses, alarms pigs by separating them, and the operator can make mistakes.

Industry officials referred me to a video made of Temple Grandin, an expert on livestock slaughter at Colorado State University, showing pigs calmly descending by elevator into a gas chamber and then emerging unconscious a few minutes later.

But Grandin told me that the new gas chamber videos show unacceptable suffering — and that this suffering is probably typical of what goes on in the gas chambers. She said that she has seen gas chambers in Denmark that have killed pigs humanely but that the difference is the genetics of the hogs and how they respond to the gas.

“This is fixable,” she said. “The solution is genetics.” She urged the industry to raise hog breeds that do not suffer so much from the carbon dioxide but simply lose consciousness, which she insisted is possible.

These questions about slaughter follow vociferous debates about the way factory farms keep sows for much of their lives locked inside narrow gestation crates, unable even to turn around. The Supreme Court will weigh in soon on a case concerning California’s right to regulate the use of gestation crates in other states, and separately a court has allowed the Humane Society to proceed with a lawsuit against Smithfield for misrepresenting to consumers how it treats sows.

I raised pigs on our family farm when I was a kid. (We sold them at the county auction yard, and I have no idea how they were slaughtered.) The sows were intelligent and had very distinct personalities — indeed, stronger personalities than some people I know. That’s one reason I don’t eat pork from factory farms.

Small farms like ours were inefficient, and the modern hog business, in contrast, is a marvel of capitalist efficiency. Its triumph is that it gives consumers extraordinarily cheap meat: Adjusted for inflation, bacon is cheaper now than it was in 1920.

But look at the video — or imagine hogs confined to crates for most of their lives — and you understand the true cost of pork.

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