

Testimony  
of  
Mr. Bev Eggleston

**Domestic Policy Subcommittee  
Oversight and Government Reform Committee**

Thursday, March 4, 2010  
2154 Rayburn HOB  
2:00 P.M.

**"Continuing Problems in USDA's Enforcement of the Humane Methods  
of Slaughter Act"**

Good Afternoon, Chairman Kucinich, Ranking Member Issa, and Members of the Domestic Policy Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you my testimony in this hearing, "Continuing Problems in USDA's Enforcement of the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act," regarding the enforcement of the Humane Slaughter Act.

I am Bev Eggleston, founder and president of Eco-Friendly Foods, LLC, located in Moneta, Va. For the last 7 years, our company has operated a USDA-inspected, small-scale, multi-species slaughter plant serving dozens of farmers and livestock producers throughout Virginia and the greater Mid-Atlantic Region, and it is in that capacity that I appear before this subcommittee today.

**1). Issues and Problems**

As you are well aware, the past decade has seen a continuing consolidation of packing capacity within the beef, pork, and chicken sectors. Not only are a handful of the largest companies now able to dominate the slaughter and processing of cattle and hogs, but numerous small-scale and regional packers have been bought up, shut down or sold out, due to their inability to compete with the economies of scale of the largest meat companies.

This consolidation raises several important issues for this oversight hearing, and should serve as the basis for congressional action going forward.

First, there are significant concerns for the safety of our meat supply, given the scale and the speed at which the largest beef and pork packaging operate. When hundreds of animals an hour are being processed, it is extremely challenging, to say the least, for operators—and federal inspectors—to ensure that the meat products produced in these plants do not enter commerce contaminated with potentially deadly microbial pathogens. The size, frequency and public health impact of the numerous product recalls and food-borne illness outbreaks traced to products from the nation's largest packing operations is testimony to the problems associated with high-speed, industrial-scale meatpacking.

Second, there are serious animal welfare issues associated with the disappearance of so many regional packing plants. No matter how humanely livestock are raised on farms and ranches, and no matter how conscientiously they are off-loaded and handled at the packing plants, too many animals must be transported thousands of miles to one of the steadily decreasing number of large packing plants—often spending over 24 hours aboard trucks until they reach their destination.

That is a serious concern for most American consumers, who are increasingly sensitive to and insistent upon higher standards of welfare for the nation's food animals. Without the availability of regional and local packing plants, farmers and ranchers are increasingly forced to subject their livestock to lengthy transport under less-than optimum conditions, a problem that cannot be addressed even with tougher regulations or stepped-up scrutiny of the part of federal inspection personnel.

## **2). Remedies**

There is, however, a solution that not only mitigates the food-safety problems inherent in our high-volume, industrialized meatpacking system, but that also addresses the humane handling challenges mentioned above. Furthermore, this remedy will also provide significant additional benefits, including:

- Financial stimulus for our country's hardest-hit rural economies
- Strong support for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's stated goal of maintaining and enhancing agricultural diversity
- Reduction in the overall carbon footprint of the U.S. food production system
- Preservation of our country's limited natural resources
- Additional healthy food choices for American consumers

Here is what I believe can be Congress' role in addressing the concerns related our overly consolidated, highly concentrated meatpacking system. First, there should be direct and immediate aid and assistance provided to small-scale, regional packing plant operations that service local farmers, ranchers and livestock producers. At the same time as we are witnessing phenomenal growth in the sales of organically grown, locally raised, humanely certified meat products both at retail and foodservice, we are allowing a potentially devastating bottleneck to develop: access to slaughter plants.

Without the availability of regional packing plants equipped and designed to service small growers and specialty producers in every state and region in this country, we not only exacerbate the problems endemic to larger plants, we eventually force smaller producers out of production, and that ultimately means fewer choices for consumers and a greater reliance on imported foodstuffs.

At Eco-Friendly Foods, for example, we purchase livestock from over forty small, diversified farmers and producers throughout Virginia and the greater Mid-Atlantic Region. Few—if any—of them would be able to continue in the livestock business if they did not have access to our plant and instead had to ship their animals hundreds of miles away for processing. In fact, without the income generated by the sales—at a premium—of the humanely certified, locally grown, specialty breeds most of them raise, their entire farming operations would be in serious jeopardy of becoming economically unsustainable.

We need Congress to direct the USDA to provide financial assistance in the form of low-cost loans and grants for small-scale processing facilities and also to educate their inspectors on the realities of small-scale meatpacking operations, such as slower production rates, multiple species, and often irregular working hours.

## **3). Results and Benefits**

Ideally, there should be several, if not dozens, of small, locally operated slaughter facilities available to farmers, ranchers and livestock producers in every state and region. This would sustain the current

growth in specialty livestock raising and encourage a new generation of farmer-growers to become producing members of our agricultural sector.

The economic benefits to rural America of such an investment would be substantial. Our total gross sales during the implementation of our model thus far (7 years) are \$3.1 million, half of which (roughly \$1.5 million) has gone directly into the pockets of our producers. This directly stimulates rural economic development, because our plant makes the business of raising livestock on a small-scale economically viable for Virginia farmers who otherwise would not be able to be profitable. That enhances agricultural diversity, rather than continuing to move toward a system of increasingly larger farms dedicated to monoculture of a limited number of commodity crops.

Such a trend jeopardizes our national food security, forces greater dependence on imported foods, raises, not reduces, food production's carbon footprint and potentially devastates the economic viability rural America as we look ahead too the next generation or two in the farm community.

For these reasons, I urge this subcommittee to take seriously the need to sustain and enlarge access to slaughter plant facilities for the tens of thousands of small livestock growers and producers by directing USDA to prioritize its support and assistance for the dwindling number of small plant operators serving the needs of farmer-producers across America.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Beverly P. Eggleston, IV