



Backtracking Slaughterhouse Deregulation to Protect Workers, Consumers, and Farmed Animals

What Is Slaughterhouse Deregulation?¹

The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responsible for regulating slaughterhouses under the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA), the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (HMSA), and the Poultry Products Inspection Act (PPIA).

Over the years, and over the significant objections of worker, food safety, consumer, and animal welfare advocates, FSIS has facilitated slaughterhouse deregulation, allowing certain slaughterhouses to increase their line speeds and reduce federal oversight, by reducing the number of inspectors on the line and allowing untrained private slaughterhouse employees to assume the inspection responsibilities previously assigned to federal inspectors. Increased line speeds and decreased federal oversight pose serious animal welfare, food safety and quality, worker safety, COVID-19, and environmental concerns. This slaughterhouse deregulation began in 1997, when FSIS established a pilot program, the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP)-Based Inspection Models Project (HIMP). Current line speeds for chickens are 140 to 175 birds per minute, 1,106 pigs per hour, and 300 to 390 cows per hour.



Slaughterhouse Deregulation Increases Farmed Animal Suffering

Inhumane handling—including hitting, beating, and excessively electroshocking animals; dragging conscious animals across the floor; and ripping bodies of chickens from their shackled legs—has been consistently documented at deregulated slaughterhouses. Handling live animals at faster speeds is challenging, resulting in animals being hurt and their bones being broken as workers struggle to force them through the slaughter line.

Before slaughter, animals are supposed to be stunned (rendered unconscious). When line speeds are increased and oversight is decreased, more animals miss the stunning mechanisms and move through the slaughter line fully conscious and aware, often facing agonizing deaths when they drown in tanks of scalding water or are dismembered alive. Faster line speeds have also been linked to frequent equipment malfunctions leading to improper animal death.

Slaughterhouse Deregulation Increases Food Safety Risks & Reduces Food Quality for Consumers

Higher-speed slaughter systems put consumers at risk by pressuring workers and inspectors to slaughter and process a higher number of animals more quickly, leading to increased contamination and foodborne illness, such as *E. coli* and *Salmonella*.

Improperly stunned or slaughtered animals often die in scalding tanks or by methods other than slaughter and are considered adulterated, or meat unfit for human consumption. With less federal oversight by trained inspectors, these carcasses are more likely to end up in our nation's food system.



According to a recent report, USDA inspectors stated that the plant employees who had replaced them were less likely to stop the slaughter line to decontaminate or discard a carcass because doing so could reduce profits.

Increased Line Speeds & Decreased Federal Oversight Lead to Serious Worker Safety Issues & Injuries

Higher-speed slaughter lines result in more injuries to slaughterhouse workers—many of whom are members of marginalized communities. Slaughterhouse workers are routinely exposed to dangerous pathogens carried by animals, work with hazardous materials and dangerous equipment, and are subject to high noise levels and dim lighting.



Workers stand for long hours—making quick, repetitive cuts on animals—leading to higher rates of repetitive motion injuries, such as carpal tunnel syndrome. Workers in meat plants experience repetitive motion injuries at rates nearly seven times higher than the average factory worker.

In many cases, meat-processing employees stand so close to each other that they cut one another with their knives as they work.

Workers on faster lines are also at higher risk for lacerations and amputations. A recent report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) shed light on the threat of retaliation against workers who accurately report their conditions, leading to underreporting and a lack of data.

Workers are routinely injured by the animals they must force through the slaughter line. They are subject to being pecked, scratched, or defecated on, as the animals fight for their lives, and workers are regularly exposed to animal digestive and fecal matter on carcasses.

Slaughterhouse Deregulation Increases the Risk of Disease Transmission, Including COVID-19

Faster slaughter lines also contribute to the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than protecting workers and consumers. Across the United States, many slaughterhouses became COVID-19 hot spots. As of September 2021, “at least 1,466 meatpacking and food processing plants . . . and 438 farms and production facilities have had confirmed cases of Covid-19. At least 91,717 workers . . . have tested positive for Covid-19 and at least 466 workers . . . have died.” Despite the risks to workers, the USDA has continued to issue waivers to slaughterhouses during the pandemic, allowing them to increase line speeds above the limits established by regulations under the PPIA and FMIA. Slower lines are needed to enable plants to effectively meet social distancing, sanitation, and safety guidelines.

Negative Environmental Impacts

Facilities with faster line speeds slaughter more animals, resulting in a greater environmental impact on surrounding areas than traditional slaughterhouses. Slaughterhouses operating at higher speeds require more fresh water, create more waste and pollution potentially released into waterways, and increase air pollution by using more energy and requiring additional trucks to transport animals to slaughter facilities.



Endnotes

1 Full citations available upon request.