



MERCY FOR ANIMALS

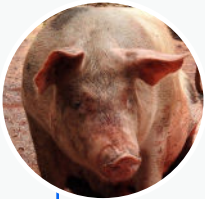
# Removing Downed Animals from the U.S. Food Supply



## What Are “Downed Animals”?<sup>1</sup>

Nonambulatory, or “downed,” animals are farmed animals who are too injured, weak, or diseased to walk or stand without assistance. Farmed animals can become downed during transport or at a farm, feedlot, market, auction, or slaughterhouse.

## Timeline of Current Downed Animal Regulations



**2002**

A mandate that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) investigate and submit a congressional report regarding downed animals was codified. Twenty years later, no such report has been issued.



**2007**

USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) banned the slaughter of downed adult cattle in response to concerns about the spread of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or “mad cow” disease.



**2014**

A coalition of animal protection groups submitted a petition for rulemaking regarding downed pigs based on the rules for adult cattle.



**2016**

FSIS banned the slaughter of downed calves raised for veal.



**2019**

USDA denied the 2014 petition regarding downed pigs.



**Currently, preslaughter inspection regulations prohibit the slaughter of only downed cows. There are no regulations for pigs, sheep, goats, horses, mules, or other equines.**

Our nation’s food system has a two-part problem: (1) too many farmed animals become downed, and (2) downed animals are treated cruelly during transport, at farms, at market facilities, and at slaughterhouses. This problem affects each species differently. Cows are supposed to be euthanized if preslaughter inspection determines they are downed, or if they become downed after preslaughter inspection, FSIS inspectors are supposed to be notified. But other downed animals, such as pigs, are currently allowed to be slaughtered after being held for hours following preslaughter inspection.

<sup>1</sup> Full citations available upon request.

Between 500,000 and one million downed pigs arrive at meat processing plants annually. A significant number of sheep and goats are also downed, although the most recent estimate of 75,000 annually has not been updated in over two decades, reflecting a lack of oversight and transparency. Many of these animals are injured or diseased, and their meat ends up in our nation's food supply.

### Strengthening Protections for Downed Animals Promotes Animal Welfare

Animals become downed due to disease, fatigue, and inhumane handling that results in injuries so serious they are unable to stand. When an animal becomes nonambulatory, producers have a financial incentive to slaughter the animal anyway so they do not lose revenue from the animal's meat. Because of this, workers often force downed animals onto the kill floor, using forklifts or other vehicles or through violent attempts to get the animals to stand and walk—shocking, beating, prodding, kicking, and dragging them with rope or chains.

Downed animals suffer terribly. In addition to serious handling concerns, downed animals are often left without food, water, or protection from the elements, in excrement-filled holding pens, for hours as they await slaughter. Researchers cite USDA documentation of fatal trampling, frostbite, and confinement in pens in direct sunlight when temperatures exceed 100 degrees Fahrenheit. And according to the *Washington Post*, the USDA Office of Inspector General has issued "numerous reports over the past decade criticizing the agency for its failure to stop the inhumane treatment of pigs in pork plants."

### Downed Animals Exacerbate Disease Risk and Reduce Food Quality for Consumers

Three in four new or emerging infectious diseases in humans come from nonhuman animals, and all major human flu pandemics can be traced back to animal origins. Because many downed pigs are ill and may carry dangerous pathogens, they pose a serious public health risk. In a 2008 study, significantly more downed pigs than control pigs tested positive for swine influenza viruses H1N1 and H3N2. The last swine flu pandemic in 2009 killed between 151,700 and 575,400 people worldwide.

Transmission of pathogens such as *Salmonella* and *Yersinia enterocolitica* often occurs when pigs are held in waste-filled pens awaiting slaughter. Because

downed pigs are unable to rise, they are held for long periods in these filthy pens, often lying in fecal matter, making exposure to harmful pathogens more likely. One study shows that downed pigs may be more likely than ambulatory ones to harbor antibiotic-resistant *Campylobacter*. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that pork containing pathogens leads to about 525,000 infections, 2,900 hospitalizations, and 82 deaths in humans each year. Currently, consumers have no way to determine whether the pork products they consume originate from downed pigs.

### Downed Animals Pose Health Threats to Slaughterhouse Workers

Removing downed animals from the food supply could also promote safety for slaughterhouse workers by lessening their risks of contracting zoonotic diseases and injury from handling immobilized, stressed animals. Slaughterhouse workers face serious workplace hazards, with reported rates of illness and injury higher than manufacturing overall. And studies show that pig slaughter plant workers have higher risk of infection with zoonotic pathogens, such as H1N1 and MRSA, particularly workers in contact with live animals.



"Downed animals pose a huge threat to worker safety. I've witnessed firsthand how workers are **forced to use violence** against downed animals and how they face dangerous workplace conditions every day, from **serious injuries**, to the **risk of disease contraction**, to **psychological and emotional harm from the horrific cruelty** they see. **No one wants to do this job**, but most of these workers have no other choice."

—UNDERCOVER INVESTIGATOR

### Government Transparency Is Needed to Assess the Scope of the Problem

Unfortunately, the federal government—specifically the USDA—has failed to regularly publish data regarding the number of downed farmed animals in the U.S. Its last report for downed sheep and goats is from 2006, and its last report for downed cattle is from 2005. It has never published data regarding other downed animals, including pigs. This lack of regulation and oversight means the public has limited information about meat production. Improved regulations and transparency are needed to understand and protect against the many hazards—some worsened by current practices concerning downed animals—that threaten public health, worker safety, and animal welfare.