

OPINION

Support Your Local Slaughterhouse

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BOLINAS, Calif. — LATE on Saturday, Feb. 8, news broke of the recall of 8.7 million pounds of beef that had come through a Northern California slaughterhouse. Social media buzzed with tweets and posts pronouncing it the latest example of a dysfunctional industrialized food system incapable of producing safe meat. “Buy local!” “Know your farmer!” “Eat grass-fed beef!”

The problem was that this slaughterhouse, the Rancho Feeding Corporation, didn’t handle only commodity beef.

Here, amid wind-swept pastures of coastal California in the epicenter of the nation’s sustainable food movement, dozens of small- and medium-scale farms and ranches, including mine, have been affected by the recall. These are grass-based operations, many of them certified organic, whose owners have labored for decades to create a food stream that is humane, ecological and wholesome.

A Rancho employee called the next morning with the news: All the beef that had gone through the plant in 2013 was covered. No exceptions. Every ounce of meat remaining in the public food supply had to be turned back in. All of it would be destroyed. The slaughterhouse provided no further information.

An Agriculture Department news release said the recall was necessary because the facility “processed diseased and unsound animals and carried out these activities without the benefit or full benefit of federal inspection. Thus, the products are adulterated.” There was no suggestion of any plant-wide contamination, and it noted that there were no cases of human illness associated with any of the beef. The Agriculture Department has refused requests for more information, citing a continuing investigation by its inspector general.

We operate a small meat company supplied exclusively by our ranch and nine other ranches that all follow the same protocols. Complying with the recall would mean destroying over 100,000 pounds of meat we had intentionally frozen throughout the year to extend our beef season. Our beef comes from grass-fed cattle. We never use hormones; we feed no drugs. We know the complete history of each animal, from the identity of its mother to where it spent each day of its life. And we knew that all our own cattle received full federal inspections at the slaughterhouse, both ante- and post-mortem.

While it’s painful to see our beautiful animals die, my husband, Bill, or our cattle manager has always accompanied every single one to the slaughterhouse stunning area. Being handled by a familiar person reassures the animals and guarantees that none is ever mistreated. We have advocated that everyone raising livestock do the same.

We are involved with each of the federal inspections as well: of live animals, whole carcasses, lymph glands and internal organs. We observe and record, at every stage, details about the condition of each carcass and the viscera. These protocols are labor-intensive, but the data is invaluable in early identification of quality problems and for assessing which lineages provide the best beef.

Those carcasses are cut in quarters and then transported from the slaughterhouse to a federally certified processing plant. Here again, before butchering, each carcass is inspected by both Agriculture Department employees and us.

Why were our rigorous procedures insufficient to keep us out of the recall? The Agriculture Department’s tools for safeguarding the nation’s meat supply are blunt and clumsy instruments, especially when dealing with independent farmers. In a battle between the slaughterhouse and the federal agency over proper inspections for animals in its commodity meat business, it was apparently decided that it would be simpler and more convenient to conduct a blanket recall. We and about 35 other farming and ranching families are the collateral damage.

Beyond the immediate financial strain caused by the recall, it threatens the very existence of the Bay Area's smaller-scale grass-fed and organic farms. The facility involved was the only remaining Bay Area slaughterhouse, and there are just a handful in all of Northern California. Now the recall has precipitated the slaughterhouse's closure. Without it, ranchers will be forced to either transport their cattle hundreds of miles for slaughter or exit the business.

People love supporting local food and farms. But when was the last time you saw someone wearing a T-shirt that said "Support Local Slaughterhouses"? But if we want to eat eggs, dairy and meat, we must come to terms with the need for good slaughter facilities available to all farmers. From 1979 to 2009, California went from having 70 slaughterhouses to 23. Because it is more complicated and costly to do so, nearly all large facilities refuse to work with smaller farms. This makes slaughtering the most serious bottleneck in the sustainable food chain.

Congress should require all slaughterhouses to open their doors to local farmers, perhaps one day a week. And the Agriculture Department should assist in establishing and maintaining smaller-scale slaughterhouses in every region.

Understaffing of food-safety inspectors may have played a role in the recall. Stan Painter, president of the National Joint Council of Food Inspection Locals, has suggested that federal inspectors are overextended and may not have had time to properly examine all of Rancho's meat.

That makes it an apt time to require video cameras throughout every slaughterhouse. Tapes would be made available to meat inspectors, and regularly handed over to the Agriculture Department as part of its oversight. The idea is not far-fetched. Cameras in slaughter facilities are already commonplace in Britain. In 2005, a United States Senate committee recommended requiring slaughterhouses to install cameras to ensure humane animal handling. As recently as 2008, the Agriculture Department gave the idea serious consideration. If cameras were installed at all key inspection points, it could also help people like us prove that the meat received full, proper inspections.

The way we track each animal is rare in the food industry. But the technology to follow an individual animal from birth to slaughter exists and is relatively inexpensive. If all animals were routinely tracked, a recall like this could be a scalpel instead of a sledgehammer.

Our company is appealing the Agriculture Department's decision to include us in this blanket recall. If allowed to stand, it will be financially devastating for us and for many other farming and ranching families. But even more abhorrent is the waste. We took the lives of our animals to feed people. Being forced to throw away their meat would be sacrilege.