

A conversation with Robert Martin on May 14, 2014

Participants

- Robert Martin — Program Director, Food System Policy Program, John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF); former Senior Officer, Pew Environmental Group; former Executive Director, the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production
- Eliza Scheffler — Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Robert Martin.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Mr. Martin to learn more about opportunities for philanthropy to reduce the harms of food animal production. Conversation topics included problems with factory farming, regulation and enforcement, recommendations by the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, reform strategies, the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF), and other organizations and funders in this area.

Problems with factory farming

Factory farming has negative impacts on animal welfare, the environment, public health, and rural communities. In many ways, animal welfare is at the center of the problem. Most states exempt farm animals from animal cruelty laws. As a result, industrially-raised food animals are generally confined to small, overcrowded spaces without proper sanitation. Routine, low-level dosages of antibiotics are used to compensate for poor living conditions and are one of the main drivers of antibiotic resistance in bacteria. Industrial operations generate large amounts of animal waste, which are collected in cesspools or, in some cases, sprayed onto fields without being properly treated to remove toxins. Waste disposal practices are an environmental and public health threat to surrounding rural communities. NGOs and philanthropists working to address climate change have become increasingly interested in factory farming, as the production and consumption of farm animals is estimated to be the cause of 9-36% of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide. Finally, factory farming enables high levels of meat consumption in the Western diet, which studies suggest can lead to obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease, and some cancers. Reducing meat intake, particularly fat intake, could improve public health.

Different kinds of food animal production

From an environmental standpoint, pork and beef production are more damaging than other kinds of animal production. It takes about nine gallons of water to produce one pound of chicken, compared to about 400 gallons for one pound of pork and about 2,000 gallons for one pound of beef.

Swine production

Swine production is the worst kind of food animal production for the environment and public health. Swine produce large amounts of waste containing high concentrations of toxins, yet there are no requirements to treat waste before spraying it onto fields. Because humans and swine are susceptible to all kinds of flu, swine are particularly likely to be agents for the development and transmission of novel flu viruses to humans.

Dairy and beef cattle production

From an environmental and public health standpoint, industrial dairy production is comparable to swine production. Dairy cows produce large amounts of waste, although their waste contains less dangerous pathogens. Inhumane practices in dairy production include amputating cows' tails to facilitate milking.

The industrial model of raising beef cattle is the least harmful, in terms of animal welfare. Cattle are raised in pastures and spend only the final portion of their lives in feedlots. However, feedlots are generally overcrowded and lacking in proper sanitation. Cattle in feedlots are fed unhealthy diets and routinely given antibiotics to keep them alive until slaughter.

Poultry production

Conditions in broiler chicken and egg-laying operations are inhumane, with laying hens being raised in small, overcrowded, overheated battery cages.

Regulation and enforcement

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has failed to enforce its oversight authority regarding feed and antibiotics used in animal production. In December 2013, the FDA issued voluntary guidelines stating that non-therapeutic antibiotics are not appropriate for growth promotion but may be used for disease prevention. This distinction is not meaningful, however, because many antibiotics used in industrial animal production have identical dosage and duration recommendations for both uses. Animal pharmaceutical companies do not expect these guidelines to affect their businesses.

State regulations governing concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) could provide good protections, but they are not being enforced. Taking legal action to require states to fund enforcement would probably not be effective, because the meat industry would aggressively oppose it and states would plead a lack of resources.

The meat industry has been very successful in protecting its interests. For example, pressure from the meat industry has led California to develop voluntary, statutory guidelines instead of statutory regulations in its ongoing effort to restrict the non-therapeutic use of antibiotics in farm animals. The "revolving door" between regulatory

agencies and the meat industry undermines regulatory efforts because regulatory officials may be motivated to protect future job prospects. Small and medium-scale producers often will not publicly criticize industrial-scale producers for violating anti-trust laws because they fear retaliation.

Large food companies and animal farming promotion groups (including the National Pork Producers Council, the National Chicken Council, the National Turkey Federation, the National Cattleman's Beef Association, and United Egg Producers) have successfully represented themselves as family farmers, a constituency that is politically dangerous to criticize. In 2012, the Obama administration proposed a rule that would have required CAFOs to report their locations and number of animals, which would have expanded the government's capacity to regulate CAFOs under the Clean Water Act, but the administration withdrew the proposal after the meat industry released attack ads in Iowa and Minnesota—key states for Obama's reelection—portraying Obama as anti-family farm.

In 2011, efforts by the Obama administration to enforce anti-trust laws were undermined by Republican senators with ties to industrial agriculture. Campaign finance reform, which could minimize the influence that large producers have on politics, may be the best way to address many of the problems of industrial animal production, but it is currently not a realistic option.

Pew Commission on Industrial Animal Production

The Pew Commission on Industrial Animal Production (of which Mr. Martin was Executive Director) has played an important role in shaping the conversation around industrial animal production and in helping NGOs identify areas to focus on. The Commission produced a report in 2008 (<http://www.ncifap.org/images/PCIFAPSmry.pdf>) that included 24 recommendations to address problems relating to public health, the environment, animal welfare, and rural communities, including:

- Ending the non-therapeutic use of antibiotics in farm animals.
- Defining “non-therapeutic use” as any use other than the treatment of disease. This definition includes routine, low-level use.
- Requiring more concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) to obtain Clean Water Act permits, which would give the Environmental Protection Agency more power to regulate those operations. Currently, only approximately 35% of industrial operations are currently permitted under the Clean Water Act.
- Aggressively enforcing anti-trust laws, which have never been enforced in agriculture and have the potential to make an impact. The outsized economic power of large processors often leads to poor treatment of contracted producers and puts smaller independent producers, who may want to switch to sustainable practices, at a competitive disadvantage. This is the Commission's top recommendation regarding rural communities.
- Phasing out liquid slurry systems. This would eliminate the practice of holding swine and dairy waste in large cesspools.

Reform strategies

Focusing on the misuse of antibiotics

Five to six years ago, it seemed that ending the misuse of antibiotics in farm animals could dismantle other problematic aspects of production, but there are now indications that doing so would not dramatically improve the system. For example, when Denmark banned the non-therapeutic use of antibiotics in farm animals in 1996, swine producers made some positive changes (e.g. increasing ventilation, composting and treating waste appropriately, moving sows from individual gestation crates to gestation pens) but large scale operations still exist and animal welfare remains an issue.

Federal vs. regional opportunities

Because the federal government plays a dominant role in national food and farm policy, it is important to monitor federal legislation such as the farm bill and the Childhood Nutrition Act. Dysfunction at the federal level, however, may limit the effectiveness of this approach. There are more promising opportunities at the state and regional level, particularly in New England and the Great Lakes region, where there are creative efforts to transition to more sustainable food systems. California is also focusing on food sustainability.

Litigation

One of the few areas where litigation could be effective is in pushing the FDA to remove penicillin and other antibiotics important in human medicine from industrial animal production—an effort that FDA began in 1978 but was stalled by Congress. The Natural Resource Defense Council (NRDC) in 2012 filed suit to force FDA to complete the process begun in 1978. If NRDC is successful, it may continue using litigation to push the FDA to ban the non-therapeutic use of other drugs.

Educating and organizing the electorate

A well-informed and organized electorate is important for focusing the government's attention on animal production. At the local level, citizens could push city officials to reexamine procurement policies in their jurisdictions. Mayors of large cities tend to be some of the more progressive leaders on food issues because of the economic and public health benefits of switching to more sustainable food systems. Some localities have food policy councils that work to change the food system on a state or local level; CLF is currently working to support and develop additional food policy councils.

Corporate outreach

Getting corporations to purchase more sustainably and humanely raised meat is an area that is getting a lot of attention. For instance, the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) has gotten corporations to agree to stop sourcing pork and poultry raised in gestation crates and battery cages. Corporate outreach is a promising area, but without

ways to hold corporations accountable for their commitments, it may not be very effective.

John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF)

The John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) is a national organization that focuses on the intersection of food policy, public health, and the environment. CLF is particularly active in Maryland, where the organization is based, and New England. It may become more active in the Great Lakes region in the future. CLF's current projects include:

- Serving as science advisor and providing technical assistance to Meatless Monday, a national campaign to eat less meat and animal products.
- Testing meat samples to determine the levels of various contaminants, such as antibiotic resistant bacteria and arsenic residue, and conducting risk assessments.
- Providing training and technical assistance to food policy councils and building new councils in areas that lack them. CLF is building new councils mostly in New England and, to a lesser extent, the Great Lakes region.
- Collaborating with faith communities in Baltimore to promote sustainable food practices. CLF is hoping to expand this project nationally.
- Evaluating food waste and the systemic factors that contribute to food waste. About 48% of calories produced in the world are wasted.
- Developing a mapping tool and database to better understand the food system in Maryland.

As the program director of CLF's Food System Policy Program, Mr. Martin is trying to start several new projects, which include:

- Conducting public opinion research on food issues and using that information to help non-profits communicate more effectively with the public. There has not been an ongoing effort to do this kind of work in this space. GRACE Communications Foundation is helping to build a consortium of foundations to support this project, which is expected to be fairly expensive. CLF hopes that this will be a five-year project.
- Conducting state-level analyses of the economic benefits of switching to more sustainable food production models. Data on this topic is already available, and research from the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University suggests that raising food more sustainably improves soil quality and can produce yields as high as industrial models can produce. This project is in a very nascent state.

CLF's core funding comes from GRACE Communications Foundation. It also receives smaller amounts of funding from, for example, Town Creek Foundation (for its Maryland Food System Mapping project) and the Pew Charitable Trusts (for some of its research on food contaminants).

Other organizations and funders in this area

Many new coalitions are forming to advocate for more sustainable food systems. For example, the Animal Agriculture Reform Coalition (AARC) is a growing network of about 35-40 non-profits and foundations that has recently begun coordinating activity in this area and is currently vetting potential projects for implementers and funders. Mr. Martin is a member of the Animal Agriculture Reform Coalition steering committee. The Sustainable Agriculture & Food Systems Funders (SAFSF) is another group that connects funders with projects. GRACE is a major supporter of SAFSF.

Other people for GiveWell to speak with

Mr. Martin recommended talking to the following individuals about opportunities for philanthropy in this space:

- Scott Cullen — Executive Director, GRACE Communications Foundation
- Erin Eisenberg — Director, Research & Investment Analysis, TomKat Foundation
- Sara Rummel — Coordinator, Animal Agriculture Reform Coalition
- Jody Spraker Pozen — Deputy Director, Rachel's Network.
- Ruth Richardson — Coordinator, Global Alliance for the Future of Food
- Virginia Clarke — Executive Director, Sustainable Agriculture & Food Systems Funders
- Sarah Bell—Program Director, 11th Hour Project

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