

More Companies Discontinuing Farm Animal Confinement

by [Ben Block](#) on April 7, 2008



Photo Courtesy of [Farmsanctuary.org](#).

Veal crates are among the confinement techniques that businesses have begun avoiding.

More companies around the world are adjusting their farm-animal confinement policies and requesting clarification of consumer labels to reflect these changes. The moves come largely in response to U.S. voter-led initiatives and the implementation of farm policy reforms in the European Union.

Animal confinement - forcing dense populations of chickens, pigs, or young cattle into cages, crates, or tight pens to more efficiently utilize farm space - is a common practice in the United States, Europe, and increasingly the developing world. Led by growth in China, Brazil, and India, industrial livestock production has grown at twice the rate of traditional forms of animal husbandry, according to a United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization [report](#). The [World Society for the Protection of Animals](#) expects factory farming in those countries to "explode," placing billions more animals into confinement.

Growing public awareness of the environmental, public health, and animal welfare challenges associated with animal confinement has lead several major grocery stores, fast food chains, and meat producers to phase out some of these practices. U.S. companies that have responded to consumer concern in recent years include [Safeway](#), North America's third largest grocery retailer; leading pork producer [Smithfield Foods](#); and hamburger giant [Burger King](#).

Mounting legislation is forcing companies to curtail confinement as well. [The E.U. voted to ban veal cages, breeding pig crates, and windowless "battery cages" for hens, and the laws first went into effect last year.](#) A campaign is now under way in the largest U.S. agricultural state, California, to hold an [animal welfare referendum](#) during the November election. A handful of other U.S. states have passed bans on veal and pregnant sow crates, but the California initiative would make it the first to outlaw all three confinement practices.

"There's a big ripple effect. These laws...send a signal to industry all across the country that accelerates progress nationwide," said Paul Shapiro, senior director of the factory farming campaign with the [Humane Society of the United States](#). The Humane Society has been organizing several of the state ballot initiatives and pressuring companies to change their practices. "The problem isn't persuading Americans that crates are inhumane. The problem is getting bills through...agricultural committees that kill [the bills]."

At a time when 73 percent of emerging human diseases are derived from animals, placing farm animals in constant close contact has led to bacterial resistance and other health concerns. Concentrated animal waste can pollute waterways with high nitrogen and phosphorus loads, and both manure and livestock release methane, a greenhouse gas more potent than carbon dioxide. Close confinement can interfere with natural animal tendencies as well. "It's the lack of normal behavior in confinement that I find most disturbing: chickens pecking at each other, pigs gnawing on cages," said Alan Goldberg, a professor of toxicology at [Johns Hopkins' Bloomberg School of Public Health](#).

Businesses that oppose animal confinement have requested that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) establish a ["naturally raised" label](#) for meat and other animal products, to differentiate from the current "natural" label, which they say is misleading. [Chipotle Mexican Grill](#), the country's largest restaurant seller of

naturally raised meat, is among businesses that note that while "natural" addresses how the meat is processed, it does not provide information on how the animals are raised, such as whether they are confined.

The "naturally raised" label that is currently being proposed, however, refers mainly to how an animal is fed or medicated, and would still allow farms to utilize conventional confinement operations. Thousands of organic food companies and consumer advocates have submitted complaints that the label would be deceptive, which the USDA is now reviewing. "Review of consumer research and comments indicate that the prohibited use of antibiotics, growth promotants, and animal by-products are the main factors consumers associate with meat and meat products from livestock they perceive as naturally raised," said Martin O'Connor, chief of the agency's standards, analysis, and technology branch in their marketing service's livestock program, in a [presentation](#) he delivered last year to the meat industry. O'Connor said the agency should announce a decision by August 1.

To address the many concerns associated with factory farming, including confinement, the [Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production](#) will release suggested changes at the end of this month. Although the commission is focused on U.S. industries, as meat consumption increases internationally and as industrialized countries import more livestock from the developing world, the report could have implications for shaping sustainable animal welfare policies worldwide, said Emily McVey, the commission's science advisor.

"More of our food is coming from other parts of the globe: Asia and South America," said Michael Blackwell, a member of the commission and former U.S. chief veterinarian. "Better [U.S.] public policy is needed to improve other sources from around the world."

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