

December 3 2004

Ann M. Veneman  
Secretary of Agriculture  
United States Department of Agriculture  
14th & Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary

I trust you have seen the video filmed at Agriprocessors Slaughterhouse, Postville, Iowa, by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and released this week. I am writing on behalf of The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), the country's largest animal protection organization with more than eight million supporters nationwide, to urge the strongest possible action to prosecute those responsible for the abuses shown in that video and to ensure that they end immediately, and are not replicated elsewhere.

The neck cutting shown in the video apparently meets the requirement of the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (HMSA) for religious slaughter:  
"Simultaneous and instantaneous severance of the carotid arteries with a sharp instrument."

However, the HMSA indicates that such a method is humane because it leads to "loss of consciousness by anemia of the brain." This loss of consciousness is not instantaneous. It follows only after there has been sufficient blood loss to cause "anemia of the brain." As such, kosher slaughter is humane if the animals are allowed to lose consciousness before any further intervention is made. In non-kosher slaughter, where cattle are stunned before sticking, they are left for approximately one minute after sticking to ensure that they do not regain consciousness, before any other procedures are carried out. Calm cattle properly restrained and cut will typically lose consciousness within 15 seconds of the throat cut. Excited cattle and those improperly restrained and cut may take over one minute to lose consciousness. The cattle in this video were clearly not calm, as is evident by the excessive electrical prod use and use of inversion restraint.

In the video we see cattle having their tracheas ripped out, being turned upright, and being dumped from a height onto the floor within 10 or 15 seconds of sticking. Both the removal of the trachea and the turning – which will cause the sides of the neck wound to contact each other – will cause extreme pain. This treatment of conscious cattle is shocking, categorically inhumane, and clearly contrary to the HMSA.

In cattle, any attempt to right themselves or stand up is a sign of consciousness (as emphasized by experts such as Dr. Temple Grandin). Every cow in the video shows these signs, and some actually succeed in standing. Many are hoisted by one leg while still conscious.

The only possible explanation of these abuses is to clear the rotating “crush” used to invert the cow as quickly as possible, so that the next cow can be introduced. This is no excuse for the appalling treatment of these animals. Furthermore, the inversion is itself grossly inhumane – as can be seen in the video from the struggling and bellowing of the cattle – and inverted animals struggling to right themselves will aspirate blood after the neck is cut. It is our understanding that inversion forms no part of the requirements of any religious faith – and upright restraint alternatives are readily available. It is urgent that the practice of inverting animals for slaughter should be terminated as quickly as possible.

It is also important to point out that there are major problems for both food safety and worker safety in these practices. Cattle are dumped onto a floor awash with manure and blood, with the open neck wound directly in contact with these contaminants. Workers are required to handle these conscious animals, often still kicking, for shackling and hoisting. These working conditions are also inexcusably unhygienic, and dehumanizing in being conducive to cultivating cruelty to animals.

We do not believe that any of these practices are a reflection on the acceptability of kosher slaughter itself. Indeed, most consumers of the products of this slaughterhouse would be as disgusted as we are by this video.

We commend the USDA for rapid announcement of an investigation into the abuses at this slaughterhouse. We look forward to hearing what actions will be taken against the slaughterhouse operators and to end the practice of inverting cattle for slaughter in the USA.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Michael C. Appleby  
Vice-President, Farm Animals and Sustainable Agriculture  
The Humane Society of the United States

cc. Mike Johanns, Secretary of Agriculture Designate  
Dr. Bonnie Buntain, Chief Veterinary Public Health Officer, USDA  
Mike Thomas, Agriprocessors Slaughterhouse, Postville, Iowa