

Raising pigs in crates is truly cruel

The National Hot Dog and Sausage Council has declared July to be "National Hot Dog Month," making now a good time to consider the lives of the animals who are brought into existence to supply the hot dogs that will be consumed at summer cookouts.

North Carolina is the nation's second-largest pork producer, and at any given point, nearly 10 million pigs call the state home. There are far more pigs than people living in North Carolina. While many residents are familiar with the environmental threats hog factory farms can pose, fewer are aware of the animal welfare problems that are common in the industry, especially for sows used for breeding purposes.

Although most pigs used for pork production endure bleak conditions, factory farms abuse breeding sows in particular in ways that are so terrible that the cruelty stands out as among the most egregious factory farming abuses. Most of these sows — social, intelligent animals — are confined in gestation crates that are only two feet wide, preventing the animals from even turning around or walking for months on end.

Pigs confined in these crates suffer immensely, unable to exercise or engage in nearly any of their natural behaviors. The forced immobilization takes a serious physical and psychological toll, leading to both leg and joint problems along with psychosis resulting from extreme boredom and frustration.



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Confinement in gestation crates is so abusive that it is being phased out throughout the European Union, with a total ban taking effect in 2013. Numerous American animal scientists also oppose these cruel crates. Farm animal expert Temple Grandin states, "Gestation crates for pigs are a real problem ... Basically, you're asking a sow to live in an airline seat... I think it's something that needs to be phased out."

And it's not only animal scientists who oppose this type of intensive confinement. Prominent figures on both sides of the political aisle agree that the use of gestation crates is deplorable. If you can get former Bush speech writer Matthew Scully, Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., conservative Republican commentator Pat Buchanan and Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio — all of whom oppose this cruelty — to agree on something, there has got to be merit to it.

Not only do pigs suffer as a result of intensive confinement, but North Carolina has been plagued with pollution problems from pig factories and their massive pools filled with manure. In fact, says Oxfam America, in just a three-year period, manure runoff caused the death of more than a billion fish off the coastal waters of North Carolina.

Simply because animals may be bred and raised for food is no justification for them to endure routine misery. In fact, abhorrence of farm animal cruelty is widespread in our country. When Florida voters were given the chance to ban gestation crates in 2002, they voted in a political landslide to do the right thing and ban the practice. Arizonans have now gathered signatures to put a similar measure on their November ballot so they can become the second state to officially ban the use of gestation crates.

As National Hot Dog Month draws to a close, we should pause to remember that pigs used in the pork industry suffer miserably. Any reasonable person can see that confining animals in crates so small they can barely move for months on end is inhumane. North Carolina can take good steps in the right direction by supporting the movement to end the most egregious factory farming practices and move away from gestation crate confinement. Both the state and the pigs would be better for it.

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