

News from Congressman Gary Ackerman 5th District – New York Queens & Long Island

January 30, 2008

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Ackerman urges U.S. Agriculture Secretary to probe all major beef slaughterhouses

Congressman makes demand in wake of undercover investigation showing illegal & inhumane treatment of injured animals

U.S. Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-NY) today called on the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to investigate all major slaughterhouses that process beef in the U.S. Ackerman made the demand in the wake of the Humane Society of the United States' release of horrifying undercover video that revealed widespread criminal mistreatment of "downer" cows – livestock too sick or injured to walk – at a major U.S. slaughter plant. The footage also showed the illegal processing of the downer cattle into the U.S. food supply. The slaughterhouse, the Hallmark Meat Packing Company in Southern California, is the second-largest supplier of beef to the National School Lunch Program and provides meat to needy and elderly families.

"We are outraged and disgusted over the cruel abuses recorded at the Hallmark plant, and we fear that other beef slaughterhouses may still be processing downer cattle into the nation's food supply in blatant violation of the law" said Ackerman. "Congress and the American people need to urgently know the extent to which downer cattle are still being passed into America's food chain."

In addition to concerns over the inhumane treatment of livestock, Ackerman also noted that downer cattle pose an enormous threat to the safety of the U.S. food supply and the health of America's beef consumers. Of the 15 known cases of Mad Cow disease in the United States, at least 12 have involved downer animals including the first reported U.S. case in December 2003.

Last July, the USDA implemented regulations which Ackerman sponsored in legislation that permanently banned the slaughter of downed animals and prohibited their use in the U.S. food supply. These new regulations – advocated by Ackerman for food safety and the humane treatment of animals – also require that downers be humanely euthanized rather than being dragged through feces-covered stockyards on the way to the slaughterhouse, and then into America's supermarkets and kitchens. The USDA adopted Ackerman's measure – which the Congressman sponsored for more than 15 years – after the agency had long opposed it.

"We call on USDA to immediately undertake a prompt and systematic investigation of the abuses which occurred at the Hallmark plant; of the weaknesses in the USDA's rule implementation and administration which allowed the practices to go unnoticed, and of the current practices and safeguards in effect at the largest beef processing plants across the United States" Ackerman wrote in a letter to Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer. "We also urge you to take the strongest possible disciplinary actions against any company or plant that is found to be in violation of USDA's July 13, 2007 rule regarding downed cattle."

The full text of Ackerman's letter is below.

January 30, 2008

The Honorable Ed Schafer
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Schafer:

A recent undercover investigation of the Hallmark Meat Packing Company in Chino, CA by the Humane Society, has exposed numerous horrifying and illegal practices that we fear may be endemic in the American meat packing industry. Accordingly we write to express both our outrage concerning the scandalous abuses recorded at the Hallmark plant, and our fear that other beef slaughtering plants may still be processing downed cattle into the nation's food supply, in blatant violation of the clear prohibitions contained in the rule the Department of Agriculture (USDA) promulgated on July 13, 2007.

During the course of their investigation, the Humane Society observed and documented numerous instances of downed cattle being barbarically abused, tortured and manhandled before being illegally slaughtered and permitted to enter the human food supply. We were even more shocked to discover that the Hallmark Meat Packing Company is the second-largest supplier of beef to the National School Lunch Program; Hallmark's beef is shipped to and consumed in 36 states. The fearlessness and prevalence of the disgusting and illegal behavior recorded by the Humane Society leads us to suspect that these practices may not be isolated incidents at the Hallmark plant in Chino or in the meat packing industry overall.

As USDA has come to acknowledge, downed cattle pose an enormous threat to the safety of our food supply and the health of America's beef consumers. Of the 15 known cases of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or Mad Cow disease, in the United States, at least 12 involved downed animals. Human consumption of BSE-laden beef has been linked to Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease – a fatal, degenerative brain disease for which there is no cure.

We call on USDA to immediately undertake a prompt and systematic investigation of the abuses which occurred at the Hallmark plant; of the weaknesses in the USDA's rule implementation and administration which allowed the practices to go unnoticed, and of the current practices and safeguards in effect at the largest beef processing plants across the United States. Congress and the American people need to know urgently the extent to which downed cattle are still being passed into the food supply. Finally, we urge you to take the strongest possible disciplinary actions against any company or plant that is found to be in violation of USDA's July 13, 2007 rule regarding downed cattle. We thank you for your attention to this matter and look forward to your prompt reply detailing the actions USDA will be taking in response to the discoveries at the Hallmark plant in Chino.

Sincerely,

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