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ORAL TESTIMONY to the Senate Select Committee on Foodborne Illness, “Are we allowing *E. coli* contaminated beef to enter California’s food supply?” hearing on February 25, 2008

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to present the results of our investigation, which documented horrendous animal cruelty and potentially serious food safety issues.

My name is Michael Greger. I am a medical doctor and currently serve as Director of Public Health and Animal Agriculture at the Humane Society of the U.S.

The abuses we documented are being downplayed as aberrations perpetrated at a single facility unbeknownst to the USDA. But, we know this is not the case. FSIS cited Westland in 2005 for mishandling animals, and it’s subsequently come out that the local Pomona Valley Humane Society and SPCA notified USDA three times about possible violations as far back as 1996. It was footage from the very same Westland plant 15 years ago shown to legislators here in Sacramento that prompted an amendment of the California penal code to prevent cruel handling of downers.

We know that downed cattle at other plants are getting into the U.S. food supply from the USDA’s own Office of the Inspector General, which chastised the Agency in 2006 for inconsistent and insufficient application of downer policies and regulations.. The OIG sampled 12 slaughter plants over 10 months and found that over two dozen downed cows were slaughtered for human consumption. Aside from the abusive treatment of these animals, the practice of slaughtering downed animals raises a number of important food safety issues.

An analysis published last Summer in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* was the latest of three reviews in the medical literature documenting the health risks associated with the consumption of meat from downer cattle. Such meat may be at higher risk of being contaminated with both conventional foodborne bacteria such as *E. coli* and *Salmonella*, as well as more exotic pathogens such as intestinal anthrax or BSE—mad cow disease.

E. coli O157:H7 is a virulent strain that infects tens of thousands of Americans every year, causes dozens of deaths, and is likely the most common cause of acute kidney

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failure among U.S. children. In 2003, a USDA-funded study found downed cows more than three times *more likely* to harbor the potentially deadly *E. coli* strain than walking culled dairy cows. Because a single ground-beef burger may include the flesh of hundreds or even thousands of different cows, a single downer infected with a pathogen like *E. coli* O157:H7 could, according to USDA researchers, hypothetically at least contaminate more than 100,000 burgers with an infectious dose.

Salmonella infection hospitalizes thousands of Americans every year, kills hundreds, and can lead to chronic conditions such as arthritis, bone infections, cardiac problems, and neurological disorders. A team led by Dr. Carolyn Stull of the UC-Davis School of Veterinary Medicine sampled 50 downed cows and found 7 to be infected with *Salmonella*. Despite infection, however, at least five of the seven cows were known to have passed USDA antemortem inspection for human consumption. That is, even though these nonambulatory animals *appeared* otherwise healthy, they carried potentially harmful pathogens.

Foodborne anthrax is an extremely rare disease, but in 2000, 32 U.S. farms were quarantined for anthrax. The CDC reported that at least five people were exposed to meat highly contaminated with anthrax after a downed steer was approved for slaughter. Had a bright-line ban on the slaughter of downed cattle been in effect, these exposures likely would not have occurred.

And, of course, there's BSE, bovine spongiform encephalopathy—so-called “mad cow disease.” Downed cattle may be 50 to 100 times more likely to be BSE-infected than walking cattle. Indeed, 12 of the 15 cases of BSE so far discovered in North America have reportedly been downed cattle. Even though the riskiest tissues—brain, eyes, and spinal cord—of most cattle have been excluded from most U.S. food items, the Harvard BSE risk assessment has noted that there may contamination of muscle meat with nervous system tissue during cattle processing. Combined with the documented resistance of the type of infectious agent responsible for BSE to even incineration temperatures, the consumption of even thoroughly-cooked meat from BSE-infected cattle may have the potential to result in the development of what's called variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease, a relentlessly progressive and invariably fatal human dementia.

In closing, a truly comprehensive ban on the use of meat from any downed animal in human food—with vigorous enforcement to ensure compliance—is needed to protect both food safety and animal welfare.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to try to answer any questions you may have.