

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Jamie L. Whitten Building
1400 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to place unprecedented pressure on our Nation's food systems, we appreciate the U.S. Department of Agriculture's leadership in ensuring American families continue to have access to healthy and nutritious food.

Unfortunately, the particular problems this crisis has caused for processing and slaughter facilities has placed some farmers and ranchers in the dreadful position of having to "depopulate" their animals on an alarming scale. The National Pork Producers Council, a trade association that represents many pork producers, reports that due to lack of access to processing, the industry could be forced to cull upwards of 700,000 pigs a week, while millions of birds raised for poultry have already been killed because of this same issue. Depopulation is always a last resort for farmers, but it is troubling that some of the accepted methods of depopulation present serious concerns. As the USDA works to meet the challenges created by the pandemic, we ask you to ensure that farmers and ranchers use the most humane depopulation methods available and prohibit the cruel use of ventilation shutdown -- whether done alone (without the addition of gas) or done in conjunction with heat. Additionally, we ask that the USDA ensure that water-based foam methods are used only as a very last resort.

When executed with heat, ventilation shutdown for poultry and pigs causes animals to die by hyperthermia. However, ventilation systems often fail, instead causing animals to slowly die from suffocation caused by the high levels of carbon dioxide and other gases that quickly accumulate in the barns. The process is inhumane, distressing, and painful for the animals who can take many hours to die. This method has not been approved as a depopulation method by the World Organisation for Animal Health, even in extreme cases. Water-based foam -- often used in the poultry industry -- essentially drowns or suffocates animals. Adapted from firefighting foam, the foam obstructs the animal's airway and causes death over several, stressful, and agonizing minutes.

If humane slaughter (as determined by federal statute and regulation) at a processing facility is not available, we ask the USDA to ensure farmers and producers use methods deemed "preferred" as outlined in the American Veterinarian Medical Association (AVMA) Guidelines for the Depopulation of Animals or "acceptable" or "acceptable with conditions" as outlined in the AVMA Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals. Though these animals are not being euthanized -- but rather "depopulated" -- these methods provide a more humane death than many depopulation methods. Under no circumstances should producers be utilizing ventilation shutdown, and water-based foam depopulation methods should only be used when all other options have been exhausted.

Thank you for your attention to this very important issue.

Sincerely,

Lloyd Doggett

Jerry McNerney

Tony Cárdenas

Debbie Mucarsel-Powell

David N. Cicilline

Donald Payne

Steve Cohen

Katie Porter

Gerald E. Connolly

David Price

Jason Crow

Mike Quigley

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Nydia Velazquez

Jim McGovern

Susan Wild