**Bad News on Beef**

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**A food safety expert discusses the largest meat recall in U.S. history.**

Michael Pollan doesn't blame workers at the Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Company for the conditions that led to the nation's [largest beef recall in history](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/17/AR2008021701530.html?hpid=moreheadlines) this past weekend. Instead, the author of "The Omnivore's Dilemma: Searching for the Perfect Meal in a Fast-Food World" aims his criticism at the mass-production system of slaughter, which produces mistakes along with millions of pounds of beef.

The Chino, Calif., slaughterhouse triggered the massive recall when the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced last Sunday that it had targeted 143 million pounds of beef, including 37 million pounds destined for schoolchildren. The recall applied to meat produced at the company over the past two years. The plant suspended operations once it was revealed that workers had likely illegally slaughtered "downer cattle"—cows so injured, weak or sick that they could barely stand (or were, in some cases, unable to stand at all). The disclosures came not from federal inspectors but from an undercover operative from the [Humane Society of the United States](http://www.hsus.org/) who secretly filmed plant workers last fall using forklifts, chains and hoses to force fallen cattle to slaughter. Two workers have been charged with animal cruelty charges under state law. A federal investigation continues.

[Pollan](http://www.michaelpollan.com/), a journalism professor at the University of California at Berkeley who visited feedlots and slaughterhouses for his influential 2006 book, calls the undercover video "one of those episodes that peels back the curtain on how our food is prepared." Speaking by phone with NEWSWEEK's Andrew Murr while promoting his latest book, "In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto," Pollan advises concerned meateaters to seek out small producers and suggests that slaughterhouses could avoid similar episodes by slowing down their production significantly. Excerpts:

**NEWSWEEK: What are the dangers posed by letting downer cattle enter the food supply?  
Michael Pollan:** They are prohibited out of concern for mad cow disease. Cows with BSE [bovine spongiform encephalopathy], as it is officially known, lose the ability to walk, so as one of the several precautions we took, we decided no downers [should enter] the food supply, and we also changed the feed of the animals and decided no meat could be taken from near the spinal column or brain material. But the other thing to be alert to is that downer cows can be sick for other reasons. Whatever the risk, do you want to be eating meat from sick cows?

**What is the economic problem?**The industry is eager to turn all cows into hamburger, basically, and they don't want to exclude anything. I've never witnessed what we saw in that video, but we are dealing with production lines that are incredibly fast. In a modern American slaughter plant, as I understand this one was, they slaughter 400 head an hour. What is that, seven per minute? Anything that slows down production is a problem. If an animal falls, he or she slows down the line. The workers are told to keep that supply coming … [Temple Grandin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_Grandin), [who] has written on [redesigning slaughterhouses](http://www.grandin.com/RecAnimalHandlingGuidelines.html) to make them more humane, has written essays on the dehumanization of slaughterhouse workers. You work that long in the presence of death, you get desensitized. You don't see animals; you see production units and quotas.

**The National Cattlemen's Beef Association says it is rare for slaughterhouse workers to behave like this. The Humane Society, which says it targeted this plant at random, says it's typical. How is a consumer supposed to navigate these opposing viewpoints?**   
I don't know the answer to that. I find it really hard to believe it's typical. But how much of this behavior is tolerable? There are rules. McDonald's has rules that they tolerate a 5 percent error rate on the use of the captive bolt gun that slaughters the animals. That means 20 animals an hours are subjected to an imperfect kill, which is to say that they are subjected to a terrifying and brutal process. Is that typical? No, it's only 5 percent. But that's a lot when you are talking about this many animals. To see those images and think this is how our lunch is getting produced—if not every day, then sometimes—is very disturbing. It's one of those episodes that peels back the curtain on how our food is prepared.

**How can a consumer who wants to continue to eat beef avoid food from factories that break the law?**   
That's a very good question. I've written a lot on industrial meat production, and it's very interesting to see how people react. Some people react by saying, "That's it, I can't eat meat anymore." Other people look at this and they put it in a box. They don't make the emotional connection between their 99-cent double cheeseburger and this process that we've seen in the video. Still other people decide they want to still eat meat, but they want to eat meat they feel good about. They want alternatives. Luckily for us, there are some really good ones. There is meat produced in small batches, from ranchers that keep their animals not in feedlots standing in their own manure but in pastureland. They are slaughtered in small plants, just a few head a day. It does tend to be more expensive, but you get what you pay for. What it takes to get a 99-cent double cheeseburger are these kinds of shortcuts: downer cattle and 400 head slaughtered an hour. But cheap food has a very high cost.

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2008/02/19/bad-news-on-beef.html>

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