



Slaughterhouse closed for inhumane treatment

Video shows calves kicked, shocked and apparently cut while conscious

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MONTPELIER, Vermont - A Vermont slaughterhouse ordered closed after video showed calves kicked, shocked and cut while conscious had its operating license suspended three times earlier this year for similar conduct.

U.S. Department of Agriculture records show Bushway Packing Inc. of Grand Isle, which was ordered closed Friday, was shut down for a day in May, again in June and again in July after an inspector cited it for inhumane treatment of animals.

The revelation came Monday as the Humane Society of the United States released more video footage taken with a hidden camera this summer. The video shows days-old male calves culled from dairy herds being dragged, kicked, repeatedly shocked with electric prods and apparently cut while still conscious.

"We found even two calves who appeared to be skinned alive while they were still conscious," said Michael Markarian, the Humane Society's chief operating officer.

Inspector's behavior scrutinized

The video also appeared to back up a Friday statement in which U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack described the conduct of a USDA inspector at the slaughterhouse as "inexcusable."

It showed an unidentified inspector appearing to coach a plant worker on how to avoid being shut down by another inspector and failing to stop an animal being cut while awake.

A call to the slaughterhouse on Monday was not immediately returned, nor was a call to a Ronald Bushway listed in Grand Isle.

USDA spokesman Caleb Weaver said Monday he could not comment on the inspector's conduct because it was a personnel matter.

Markarian said it appeared several calves were abused because they would not or could not stand up to be prepared for slaughter. The slaughterhouse specialized in "bob veal" — meat from days-old calves that ends up in hot dogs and lunch meats. Meat sold as veal usually come from animals raised to about 4 months old.

Certified organic producer

Some in the Vermont dairy industry said they worried the revelations would give an enterprise generally viewed as wholesome a black eye. Bushway Packing was certified as an organic processor, raising extra concern in that sector.

"That's not right, that's really nasty," said Paul Stecker, an organic dairy farmer from Cabot, after watching the video on the Humane Society's Web site. "I wouldn't be in this business if that's the way it was. That's not the norm, I can tell you that."

Stecker said the slaughterhouse's problems also would bring attention to an aspect of dairying most farmers don't like or talk about much: The vast majority of male calves born on dairy farms face very short lives.

"That kind of thing hurts us all, like our industry really needed that," he said.

Dairy farmers nationwide have been struggling as a global milk glut has resulted in dramatically lower prices for their milk.

The Humane Society said it would propose tighter rules for the meatpacking and related industries, including a requirement that male calves born on dairy farms be kept there until they are 10 days old to ensure they are strong enough to travel.

Kelly Loftus, a spokeswoman for the state Agency of Agriculture, said she expected there would be strong opposition to such a measure.

"There are labor costs involved. There are feeding costs involved," she said. With the current crisis in dairy farming, "any extra expense could mean that a farm has to close."

Nicole Dehne of Vermont Organic Farmers, a group that certifies Vermont farms as organic under an agreement with the USDA, said the group's national counterpart is meeting in Washington this week and will discuss humane

treatment of farm animals.

Organic rules now are geared mainly toward ensuring meat labeled organic comes from animals raised without hormones or chemicals.

"I think consumers expect organic regulations to cover all aspects of animal welfare, including slaughter and transportation," Dehne said. "If we need to tighten the regulations in regard to processing facilities, and come up with guidelines to address more humane transportation, I think we would respond to the expectations of the organic consumer."

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