



Intensive Farming of Animals

What do we mean by 'intensive farming of animals'?

Intensive farming of animals is the rearing of farm animals in large populations, primarily in enclosed environments, usually accompanied by grain feeding (rather than allowing grazing or foraging), with the intention of increasing the per-animal yield of meat, milk or eggs. In zero-grazing systems, animals are never put outdoors and are fed entirely on silage and/or grain. Meat animals in intensive systems are selectively bred for rapid growth and, in the case of poultry, larger breast muscles. Dairy cows in intensive systems are selectively bred for maximum milk production.

Intensive farming – the facts

More than 10 million dairy cows in the European Union are housed in tie-stalls (restrained by the neck) and/or zero-grazed.¹

Lameness is found in approximately 25% of the US dairy herd and in 20–25% of the EU herd.¹

In the USA, more than 90% of dairy cows are indoor reared, with fewer than 2% having any access to pasture.²

In Australia, the number of beef cattle being grain-fed (rather than on pasture) trebled between 1992 and 2004.³

At least 50% of all pigs reared in the world are in industrial systems (about 700 million pigs per year).⁴

Approximately 90% of pigs reared for meat in the EU are housed in barren systems (hard floors without bedding).⁴

Worldwide, more than 70% of chicken meat comes from industrial systems, with approximately 90% of broiler chickens in the EU, and around 72% in the UK, reared in indoor systems.⁵

The majority of egg-laying hens in the USA are still kept in battery cages.⁶

Breeding for maximum productivity results in breeds (and individual animals) that may be predisposed to poor health and welfare.⁷ Lameness and infection are more common in these animals than in lower-yield breeds.

Surgical mutilation (tail docking, debeaking, tooth trimming) is often used to curb harmful behaviours that develop as the result of stress caused by intensive rearing conditions.⁷

Farm animals are often highly social species, and suffer great distress when separated from companions or offspring⁸, something that happens frequently in intensive systems.

Intensive farming and disease

The risk of *E. coli* and *Salmonella* is greater in intensive production systems than in more traditional farming systems, and fast-growing poultry may be more susceptible to *Campylobacter* infection than slower growing breeds.⁹

Antibiotics are used in intensive systems as growth promoters and to prevent infection. This non-therapeutic use can lead to the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria that, when they infect humans or other animals, result in infections that are untreatable with standard antibiotic therapy.¹⁰

Antibiotics given to farm animals orally (through feed, etc) reach the soil through urine and faeces (up to 72% of active ingredient given can be recovered from soil); the effect of these antibiotics on soil microbiology is unknown.¹¹

What drives intensive farming?

Despite the many problems associated with intensive farming, it is becoming more common. Why? Sadly, because farming is now big business, and intensive rearing of animals is seen as the easiest way to increase efficiency and maximise profit. Too often, profit often takes priority over ethics. But this runs contrary to a report commissioned by the UK government in 1995, which stated:

*Doubtless abolition of child labour in 19th century Britain could have been opposed on the grounds that it would have disadvantaged British manufacturers...but...the claims made upon us by ethical principles cannot simply be suspended where those principles seem to conflict with self-interest.*¹²



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What are the alternatives?

Outdoor-reared, free-range and organic systems all provide greater animal welfare than intensive systems. But these systems are more labour intensive, and the resulting product more expensive than industrially produced meat, milk and eggs.

What does the Bible say?

The righteous know the needs of their animals, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel (Proverbs 12.10)

The use of 'righteous', to be one who is 'after God's heart' is significant. If an animal's needs include an appropriate diet, rest, the ability to respond to their instincts and engage in natural behaviours, access to natural light and fresh air, and freedom from pain, then intensive farming of animals cannot be understood as anything other than ungodly and unrighteous. The Bible even demonstrates an awareness to allow animals to engage in their natural behaviours, and to have appropriate rest:

You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain (Deuteronomy 25.4).

The seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns (Deuteronomy 5.14)

In intensive farming systems, the animals have no rest, and no opportunity to engage in their natural behaviours, including rest, recreation and social bonding.

The Bible also has something to say about putting money first:

You cannot serve God and wealth (Matthew 6.24).

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6.10)

To be faithful servants of God, we must learn to put the welfare of his creatures before wealth – whether that is profit or cheap food.

What can Christians do?

- Pray – include farm animal welfare in both public worship and private prayer.
- Eat less (or no) meat – if we all reduce our meat consumption, the perceived demand for intensively reared meat would disappear. Eating less meat frees up money to buy more ethically produced meat. Try having meat-free Mondays or a Vegetarian Lent.
- Be selective in shopping – Choose only organic, free-range and RSPCA freedom food products. Check the labelling on products that include meat, eggs and dairy (e.g. lasagnes and quiches) – if the label doesn't indicate the welfare standard, don't buy it. Ask restaurants about where they source their meat, dairy and eggs, and what they know about the welfare of the animals. Avoid buying meat from fast-food outlets, especially chicken.
- Support – there are charities, such as Compassion in World Farming, the RSPCA, the RSPCA Australia and the HSUS, who are speaking with a prophetic voice and working to end suffering, and they deserve our support.
- Make your voice heard – write to your local and national representatives in government (EU residents can also write to their MEP) and ask them to support legislation that ends the cruel practices of intensive farming, including indoor-only rearing, battery cages, farrowing cages, etc. Write to your local supermarket requesting organic and free-range products, and asking that only products from animals reared to the highest welfare standards be included in their product ranges.
- Spread the word – tell friends, colleagues and others about the cruelty of intensive farming, the alternatives available when we shop, and ask them to get involved.