

# Editorials

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## The Agricide Treadmill and Farm Animal Welfare

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The "factory farming" of animals is, in essence, a product of what **W.W. Cochrane** in *Farm Prices, Myth and Reality*\* terms the "agricultural treadmill." As with the research development and application of insecticides,\*\* the development of intensive confinement systems for raising livestock and poultry was not motivated by hunger or the threat of famine but by the treadmill effect of increasing capital rather than labor-intensive farming practices. J.H. Perkins observes, "Apples, corn (for feeding livestock) and cotton became the largest users of insecticides after 1950, and the context of their use on those crops provides an interesting demonstration that the protection of capital-intensive farm-

ing was the foundation for inventive and innovative activity in insect-control technology." In the face of year after year of food-surpluses from over-production, it is ironic that chemical crop farming and "factory" farming of animals should have evolved, but this is because of the treadmill effect of farmers competing to reduce production costs (and not, as agribusiness claims, to produce cheap and wholesome food for all). Perkins summarizes this phenomenon as follows:

"...As Willard W. Cochrane so elo-

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\*Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1958.

\*\*J.H. Perkins, Insects, food and hunger: the paradox of plenty for U.S. entomology 1920-1970. *Environmental Review* 7:71-96. 1983.

quently put it, farmers in the United States were on a 'treadmill' during most of the twentieth century but especially after 1945. Farm surpluses, which depressed prices, were the hallmark of American agriculture. Individual farmers could better their own income only by lowering the unit production costs of their crops so as to compete favorably in a market place that could not absorb all of the produce entering it at a price commensurate with production costs. Lowering of production costs was achieved primarily by adopting new technology in the form of machines, fertilizers, pesticides, and other items. Farmers adopting the new production practices first tended to profit the most, but they also tended to raise the amount of produce reaching an already glutted market, thus depressing prices further. Farmers who adopted new practices later were able to stay in business but not able to earn handsome returns. Those who did not adopt new technology were gradually forced to retire from business because the prices they received

were not enough to pay for the production inputs. Subsequent new inventions started a new round on the treadmill process. Again, early adopters profited handsomely, middle adopters stayed in business, and late and non-adopters were the ones who left farming."

The consequences of this treadmill effect can be summed up in the one word: agricide. So far as meat is concerned, it is simply a convenience food. By being touted for its high, almost "complete" nutritional value (which no single vegetable product can provide by itself), meat has become a staple in our diets. Yet with a combination of vegetable products, a more nutritionally complete meal can be prepared without meat, and one that is more healthful, than one based primarily upon the "convenience" of meat, the continuing overproduction and consumption of which contributes significantly to agricide and to even more animal suffering and deprivation, as the treadmill forces farmers to adopt even more intensive and inhumane husbandry practices.