

PLAYING CHICKEN WITH SMALL FARMERS

AVIAN FLU RESPONSE REWARDS FACTORY FARMS, PUNISHES LOCAL PRODUCERS

by Cathy Holtslander

If you believe the stories that have been circulating in the media lately, you may well think that a rampant bird flu epidemic is “inevitable.” You may have heard that the only way to avoid the disease is to kill all free-range poultry and confine the rest in “biosecure” factory farms so as to avoid all contact with wild birds. It’s enough to scare the living daylights out of you, and put you off chicken cordon bleu for life!

But what is really going on with avian flu? The truth is that the highly pathogenic form of avian flu does not develop in wild birds or backyard poultry because their populations are too spread out and diverse. Factory farms, with their uniformity and crowding, provide perfect conditions – and a practically unlimited supply of potential hosts – for the emergence of diseases like avian flu. Since the disease was identified in Asia over three years ago, roughly 100 people have died from the illness. But the disease has not mutated into a form that is transmissible from person to person. More and more evidence shows that outbreaks follow transportation and trade routes, not migratory flyways. And countries where backyard flocks are isolated from industrial poultry production have not been affected by the bird flu.

FAMILY FARMERS LOSE

So whose interests are being served by the media hype? The corporate industrial poultry sector and pharmaceutical corporations, of course. The losers are small farmers, organic poultry producers and rural communities. These policies also punish consumers, who increasingly want to purchase free-range poultry and eggs. And they threaten the genetic bio-



It's factory farming, not free-range poultry that's helping to spread avian flu.

diversity of the world's poultry and wild bird populations.

Industrial livestock production creates the conditions for catastrophic disease problems by concentrating huge numbers of animals in small spaces, feeding them the cheapest food possible, centralizing and speeding up processing, and distributing the product widely via domestic and export markets. One way that the disease is spread is through poultry litter (manure) being sold as

feed for factory fish farms and factory poultry operations. Industrialization and centralization of livestock have occurred simultaneously with two major disease crises in the United Kingdom – hoof and mouth disease and BSE (or “mad cow disease,” as it’s commonly known). We are now seeing the same phenomenon with avian flu.

CONTROL DISEASE, NOT SMALL FARMERS

Clearly the answer to avian flu is not to blame the victims, demonize outdoor producers and industrialize the food system even further. Canada needs to place strict controls on existing factory farms to prevent and contain disease outbreaks. But more importantly, we need to reclaim our food system from the corporate sector.

See the Beyond Factory Farming Coalition's fact sheet on avian influenza at www.beyondfactoryfarming.org for more information, including how can you find sources of non-factory-farmed meat, dairy and poultry in your community.

Cathy Holtslander is the Project Organizer for the Beyond Factory Farming Coalition.

FACTORY FARMING COALITION TAKES OFF

The Council of Canadians is handing over the reins of its factory farming campaign to the Beyond Factory Farming Coalition. The Coalition is made up of over 40 national, regional and local organizations across Canada, all working toward one common vision: livestock production for health and social justice. The Coalition's work will be administered and supported by the newly formed Free Range Worker Cooperative to be staffed by Cathy Holtslander, Lisa Bechthold and two additional workers. The Council of Canadians will make sure that members and chapter activists are kept informed about the Beyond Factory Farming Coalition's campaigns. Visit www.beyondfactoryfarming.org, or call 1-877-955-6454, for more information.