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Globalization & Me

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Living in Gainesville, Georgia (the “Chicken Capital of the World”) I am almost always stuck driving behind a chicken truck packed full of broiler chickens, who stare at me from their tiny cages. With a sudden change in the breeze, the air will turn putrid from the smells emanating from the chicken rendering plant. For the Globalization and Me assignment, I chose to focus on animal agriculture; Specifically factory farms and the detrimental effect they have on our environment globally and locally.

Factory farms in the United States have an incredible potential to pollute. Factory farms concentrate an unnatural number of animals in one place, which creates an unmanageable amount of waste. For example, a single hog excretes up to 17.5 pounds of manure and urine each day. Put 1,000 hogs together, and that’s six million pounds of waste each year. On a factory farm containing 35,000 hogs, over four million pounds of waste are produced each week, and over 200 million pounds each year. Whereas on a sustainable farm animal waste can be a tool, in factory-farm amounts it becomes a major pollutant. The massive amounts of waste produced in factory farms is so poorly managed that it seeps into rivers, lakes, and oceans- killing wildlife and polluting air, water, and land in ways devastating to human health.

Air pollution results from the overuse of machinery, the mismanagement of manure, and the irresponsible feeding practices that characterize industrial farming. According to the United Nations, animal agriculture makes a 40% greater contribution to global warming than all transportation in the world combined; it is the number one cause of climate change. Factory farms emit harmful gases and particles such as methane and hydrogen sulfide, which contribute to global warming and harm the health of those living or working nearby. People who live near factory farms are rarely wealthy and are treated by the industry as dispensable. The pollution they are exposed to is not deadly but can cause sore throats, headaches, coughing, runny nose, diarrhea, and even psychological illness, including abnormally high levels of tension, depression, anger, and fatigue.

Chemical fertilizers and pesticides have turned agriculture into a leading source of water pollution in the United States. Runoff from factory farms kills fish, degrades aquatic habitats and threatens drinking water supplies. In 1995, Smithfield spilled more than twenty million gallons of lagoon waste into the New River in North Carolina. The spill remains the largest environmental disaster of its kind, and is twice as big as the iconic Exxon Valdez spill six years earlier. The spill impacted the river as well as surrounding crops and area groundwater. Several dozen fish were found dead and others would retain toxins from the spill for years. Acres upon acres of soybean and tobacco crops were covered by the waste. Conservative estimates by the EPA indicate that chicken, hog, and cattle excrement has already polluted 35,000 miles of rivers in 22 states (for reference, the circumference of the earth is roughly 25,000 miles). Additionally, factory farms use tremendous amounts of water, which cuts into our precious supplies of water that are not contaminated.

Factory farming has such a detrimental effect on our environment that according to Environmental Defense, if every American skipped one meal of chicken per week and substituted vegetarian foods instead, the carbon dioxide savings would be the same as taking more than half a million cars off U.S. roads. Similar research done at the University of Chicago concluded that switching from a standard American diet to a vegan diet is more effective in the fight against climate change than switching from a standard American car to a hybrid.