



# Aware consumers want ethical food standards

**Agriculture officials today ordered the recall of an unprecedented 64 million kilograms of ground meat from illegally-slaughtered 'downed' dairy cows. A videotape showed animals (unable to stand on their own and known as downer cows) that had passed a veterinary inspection but were not walking before slaughter. Filmed at the Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Company, injured animals were beaten and prodded and a forklift was used to shove living downer cows onto the killing floor, contrary to the law.**

SOUND familiar? No it isn't another case of the live cattle trade in Indonesia, but an article reported in 2008 about an abattoir in California after an undercover investigation into animal cruelty.

The Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Company was reported to United States federal and state governments by The Humane Society of the United States, which provided videotaped evidence and a detailed report to officials.

Another case of inhumane treatment of cattle was broadcast live on the BBC last year. It uncovered a rogue vendor at a farmers' market badly treating cattle, resulting in the business immediately being shut down. The market, at which he was a vendor, was closed.

What this shows is that animal cruelty is not religion, or third-world practice, but a result of consumers being so separated from their food chain that industry operates on the basis of 'what the consumer doesn't know won't hurt them'.

While consumers are either kept in the dark or prefer not to know, such practices will continue.

As consumers, we must also take responsibility for the whole chain of events that underpins the supply of food to our tables.

The only way we can do that with confidence is to demand food industry regulatory systems that enable consumers to make informed choices in the knowledge that compliance will be upheld.

Profit margins and cost pressures from multinational food giants no doubt contribute to cost-cutting by producers.

However, rather than providing

cheaper food to consumers, pressure on producers is often more about the company's bottomline and market share than it is about passing on savings.

Too often, it is the food corporation lobby groups that tell governments how to regulate.

More competition would enable consumers to shop with their feet and force smart retailers to understand the needs and wants of their consumers.

It is not one big mass market out there anymore, but a segmented and differentiated one based on a whole range of factors of which price and animal welfare are just the tip of the iceberg.

Have you seen the egg section in the supermarkets recently?

Tesco in the United Kingdom has clearly understood and responded to market research that confirms its consumers are sophisticated and prepared to pay for food that is not only ethically-produced, but that also meets sustainable farming concerns.

Carbon foot-printing, food miles and traceability are standard practice and certain to be more important as consumers become more informed and vocal.

What many considered a 'mad fringe' group on the edge of the food chain a generation ago is almost mainstream, representing one of the driving forces for change.

The live cattle industry can scream and complain as much as it likes, but it does do so at the risk of not reading the writing on the wall.

Producers who want to remain in the food business need to meet the challenges of change.

From *Smart Farmer*, July 2011, pg 3