Modern meat production and manufactured risk

Science, Agriculture

SOC 321 — Week 5 Modern Meat Production & ‘ Manufactured Risk’ Since 1950, world meat production has increased fivefold. No society past or present raises and kills so many animals just for their meat. No other society has ever adopted such intensive systems of animal production and nonrenewable resource dependent farming practices. These have evolved to make meat a dietary staple and to meet the demand for ‘ cheap’ and plentiful supply of meat. Billions of animals are slaughtered every year and some environmentalists argue that it s not economical or ecologically sound to feed them in a hungry world. In their view, excessive meat eating is a form of ‘ conspicuous consumption.’ They say the hidden costs of factory farming are not clearly evident — it is not economically efficient, ecologically sustainable or socially and ethically acceptable. The harms of over production are numerous and far reaching. Cycles in countries like Brazil where cattle are over produced have the effect of depressing world market prices and deforestation (for cattle ranches) results in environmental degradation. Price supports and subsidies are given to farmers in the developed world, which encourages them to over produce, causing further inequality in world market prices. This form of protectionism (and things like import tariffs) means that they are able to flood world markets and sell below production costs (which is unfair to local farmers). Or they respond by simply ‘ dumping’ excess meat and dairy products. Importing food keeps developing countries dependent. Poor countries are being encouraged to follow this model and are being required to adopt intensive farming methods to increase agricultural production. To do this they will have to feed more animals than the land can sustain from local resources alone. Food will be

fed to farm animals instead of hungry people. Another issue worth considering is the amount of wastage or animal tankage that the meat industry generates. As a by-product of slaughtering so many animals huge amounts of waste and excrement is created, which has to be dealt with. Residues of nitrates, phosphates, bacteria, antibiotics, steroids and hormones overload and pollute the environment. This practice of using this waste for pet food (even ‘ rendering’ it with dogs and cats put to sleep at shelters) or for animal feed or fertilizer has been linked to food poisoning in humans and Mad Cow Disease in cattle. Excess meat eating has also been linked to the so-called diseases of over consumption like heart attacks, strokes, diabetes, hypertension, obesity and cancer. Conditions at abattoirs are rarely seen on TV or in other media and most people have no clue what actually happens there and how animals are killed. Animal welfare inspectors have reported calves being born on transport trucks and still kicking in their mother’s stomach as she is having her throat slit. In South Africa legislative and other changes have taken place and The Meat Board which regulated slaughtering facilities and the selling of carcasses, ceased to exist in 1997. Because of deregulation, some of the state-run abattoirs have closed down and others have been privatized and there has been a proliferation of abattoirs. Deregulation combined with the growing number of small abattoirs means that little or no monitoring (including health and animal welfare checks) is taking place. The body replacing the Meat Board — the South African Meat Industry Company (SAMIC) actively markets and encourages meat eating and the government promotes factory farming in this country (Pickover, 2005). Cattle: Far from their natural habitat, the cattle in feedlots

become prone to all sorts of illnesses. What they are being fed plays a role in this. The rise in grain prices has encouraged the feeding of less expensive materials to cattle and this includes the rendered remains of dead sheep and cattle (even cats and dogs). This practice is being banned now that people realize this is what caused the outbreaks of Mad Cow Disease. Chicken manure is also fed to cattle as is sawdust and old newspapers used as litter on poultry plants (Schlosser, 2002: 202). The pathogens from infected cattle are spread not only in feedlots, but also at abattoirs (slaughterhouses) and hamburger grinders and mincing machines. The slaughterhouse tasks most likely to contaminate meat are the removal of the animal's hide and the removal of its digestive system. If the hide has not been cleaned properly, when it is pulled off (by machine) chunks of dirt and manure may fall from it onto the meat. Stomachs and intestines are still pulled out of cattle by hand and if not done properly and carefully, the contents of the digestive system may spill everywhere. The increased speed of today's production lines makes the task more difficult and a single worker at a ' gut table' may eviscerate 60 cattle an hour or 1 a minute. The consequences of a single spill are quickly multiplied as hundreds of carcasses quickly move down the line. Knives are meant to be cleaned and disinfected all the time, something hurried workers easily forget. A contaminated knife spreads germs to everything it touches. Overworked and often illiterate workers do not always understand the importance of good hygiene and if they drop a piece of meat on the floor simply pick it up and place it back with the rest. Chickens: With regard to chickens, a study done in 2003 revealed that the poultry industry consumes more than 30% of all locally produced maize. Broilers (chickens

used for meat not laying eggs) are genetically engineered to grow unnaturally fast so that they become ‘ big and breasty.’ Their legs often break under the weight. Antibiotics are administered to keep them alive long enough to make it to slaughter. Up to 30 000 chickens are kept on each modern factory farm floor and this results in stress, breast blisters, chronic dermatitis and leg disorders. Their faeces are not removed until the next batch moves in, so they are subjected to strong ammonia fumes and disease. The largest broiler processor in SA is Rainbow Chickens which accounts for 40% of the market and supplies the fast food industry chains like KFC, Chicken Licken and Nandos. It also supplies the SANDF and the Dept of Correctional Services and exports to many countries. In a typical battery cage a hen has a space the size of an A4 piece of paper to live in. ‘ End of lay’ hens (often featherless and broken boned) are sold by farmers at rip-off prices to the poor for home slaughter. A UWC study (where chickens sold at the side of the road were randomly selected and tested) showed that the ‘ systematic sale of live chickens to disadvantaged communities for informal slaughter has potentially lethal consequences especially for the very young, the very old and those carrying the HIV/AIDS virus’. The tests conducted showed that the chickens were contaminated with a range of dangerous disease-causing bacteria. But before they are slaughtered the hens endure lots of pain and discomfort. Within hours of hatching their toes are cut with a pair of scissors to prevent them growing around the wire of the cage. Then at 10 days they are debeaked (burnt off at extreme heat) and this is very painful to hens as they need their beaks for all sorts of things like eating, pecking, preening and grooming. Often their tongues are also injured.

For every hen in a battery cage, a day old male chick is killed at the hatchery because since they cannot lay eggs thus they have no economic value. They are either drowned or gassed or thrown alive en masse into the rubbish. Or they are suffocated, ground up alive in a machine which crushes them to death between two rollers or minces them with blades. The adults who get to the slaughterhouse remain in crates for hours (after long road trips) until they are shackled upside down on a conveyor belt, which carries them to a stun bath and then their throats are slit. No statistics are available on the number of animals that arrive dead at the abattoir because of the long road journey where they endure extreme weather conditions and are jam packed together without food or water. Others arrive too weak to move or are seriously injured. The overcrowded and unhygienic conditions farm animals are kept in is an ideal climate for the spread of disease. Many arrive at the abattoir covered in faeces and food borne illnesses like E. Coli 0157: H7 are then spread to humans who eat their meat. According to the Department of Health, “ food contamination by biological agents of disease is now recognized as a major public health problem all over the world’. Since many of the animals at abattoirs are not inspected the full extent of the problem is not known. (Pickover, 2005). In SA and elsewhere, the meat-eating trend is fuelled by the growth of the ecologically and culturally devastating fast food industry. More and more people are becoming aware of the link between excessive meat consumption and world hunger and they are advocating a change in farming practices. According to Schlosser in his groundbreaking expose, Fast Food Nation (2002: 195), every day in the USA, around 200, 000 people become ill from a food borne disease, 900 are hospitalized and

14 die. Incidences food borne illnesses are increasing and their long term effects are becoming known. This nation’s industrialized and centralized system of food processing has created a whole new sort of outbreak (different from a typical outbreak at a wedding, family supper or similar), one that could potentially sicken millions of people. Schlosser (2002: 204) argues that just like the multiple sex partners help spread the AIDS epidemic, the huge admixture of animals in most American ground beef plants has spread a crucial role in spreading E. coli 0157: H7. This bacterium is a newly emerged pathogen whose spread has been facilitated by recent social and technological changes. Schlosser argues that the rise of huge feedlots, slaughterhouses and hamburger grinders seems to have provided the means for this pathogen to become widely distributed in the food supply. A single fast food burger now contains meat from dozens, even hundreds of cattle and not all of them were in good health. The cheapest ground beef (mince) is likely to be the most contaminated with pathogens and also contains pieces of spinal cord, bone and gristle. A study in the USA revealed that the largest supplier of minced meat for school lunches and a well known takeaway outlet called Wendy’s routinely processed cattle that were already dead when they arrived at the abattoir. They also hid diseased cattle from inspectors (due to the high value of carcasses — R4000-5000) and mixed returned rotten meat with packages of hamburger meat. Another concern is Salmonella, which results from fecal contamination in meat. Dairy farming: This practice also exploits animals. Calves born to dairy cows are separated from their mothers at birth (so humans can have the milk made for the calf) and thousands of newly born male calves are disposed of daily. Some of

course will spend their short lives in a crate so they can be used for veal. Animals are victims of the profit-driven, industrialized food production system, but it also poses great economic, ecological, health and social risks to humans. Certain types of meat like battery chickens and veal are considered especially cruel and those concerned with animal welfare tend to avoid those and opt for humane options by eating organic and free range meat or become vegetarians instead. In this way veganism, vegetarianism and animal rights are thus seen as social justice issues. The global issue of farming animals for food is increasingly becoming a political question which in all good conscience cannot be ignored (Pickover, 2005). In the words of a local animal rights activist, Michele Pickover “ animal-based agribusiness corporations are the new agricultural colonialists and the western diets they purvey are a form of neo-colonialist seduction. " Factory farming is threatening is increasing poverty and threatening human health and food security. An aspect of globalization is that those who need the food most are using their land in the most wasteful way to grow food to feed the meat-eating habits of those who already have enough to eat. The costs to those countries wishing to mimic western lifestyles are potentially enormous. 50% of all grain in this country is fed to animals and raising animals for food requires more water than all other uses combined. For example, each kilogram of beef needs 10 000 litres of water for its production, maintenance and slaughter. In a water stressed country like ours, this amount of water usage is a serious consideration (Pickover, 2005).