The Hidden Costs of Cheap Meat

The animal rights activist Leah Garcés discusses how modern meat production harms animals, people and the environment.

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[MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra Klein

I'm Ezra Klein. This is "The Ezra Klein Show."

OK, before we begin today, we're going to do an end of the year, ask-me-anything episode. So if you've got anything you'd like to ask me, or hear me grapple with, or reflect on in public, send your questions to ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com, again ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com, with "A.M.A." in the subject line.

But OK, today's episode, speaking of emails, we're going to get some emails on this one. Let me start here. I think it's fair to say that a dominant belief in our time is that low prices are good. We want low prices.

High prices, those are bad. Inflation is bad. Really, anything being expensive is bad.

And I want to give that view real credit. Low prices are, or certainly can be, an issue of justice. Low prices are how the things we want and need aren't just reserved for the rich. But low prices, they have to be real prices.

We've put, in this country, a lot of energy and money and research and policy into getting the prices of food low, and particularly, into getting the prices of meat low. And it has worked spectacularly well. About 50 years ago, chicken and ground beef, they each cost around $1 a pound. Put that in today's dollars, and that's more than $7 a pound. But you go to the supermarket, and that is not what ground meat costs today. Ground beef costs about $4.80 a pound. And chicken, chicken only costs about $1.80 a pound. These are huge price falls. And as you'd expect, we eat much, much, much, more meat because of them.

And so I want to make a very unpopular argument here. If you're a politician, do not run on this platform. Meat is too cheap. These prices are fake. And in being fake, they are warping our whole system, our relationship to the environment, to animals, to ourselves.

In capitalism, a price is a miraculous thing. It is a store of information. It converts the cost of something, what it required to get the materials, to pay the labor, the factories it had to build it and on and on and on, all of that, into one shiny number so people can make good decisions and the whole system can remain in a kind of balance.

But that only works if the price does include all the relevant costs, if those costs aren't being hidden somewhere else, being paid by someone else. When that happens, it's called an externality. And for economists, externalities are a scourge. They're these things that prices should include but don't. And because they're under priced, they keep us from making the decisions that we would be making if the price was working as it is supposed to.

And meat is full of externalities. We've made meat cheap by offloading its cost onto animals, onto the environment and onto each other.

I want to say, before we go further, this isn't just a show, today, about animal suffering, though it is about that. It's about human suffering. And it's not a show about why you shouldn't eat meat — I'm among those who think there are pretty ethical ways to eat meat — but it is a show about why meat should cost what it actually costs, and the ways that might make our relationship to the animals we eat, and to the world we live in, a little bit healthier.

Leah Garcés is the C.E.O. and president of Mercy for Animals, and the author of "Grilled: Turning Adversaries into Allies to Change the Chicken Industry." She's unusual for how many different aspects of the system she works on. She's spent a lot of time on what the animals are undergoing, what farmers are going through, what is happening to the communities that live alongside industrial animal operations and much more. She's able to give an unusually panoramic sense of what it costs to get meat to your plate. I'm not going to pretend that this is always a fun conversation

to listen to. But I do think it's one of our more important ones. These are things, however you eat, that everybody should know. And as you'll hear, a lot of money and power is expended to make sure we don't know them or that we can't change them. As always, my email, ezrakleinshow@nytimes.com.

Leah Garcés, welcome to the show.

Leah Garcés

Thanks for having me. I'm really happy to be here.

Ezra Klein

Well, wait till people hear what you're going to say. It's going to totally change the vibe. [LAUGHS] Let me begin here. So if you look at the cost of meat, really any meat you can think of, over the past 50 years, inflation adjusted, it has gotten way cheaper. And as a result, we eat a lot more of it.

And so I want to explore, here, how that's happened. And let's begin with this. What's different about the way a chicken makes its way to your plate today than 50 years ago?

Leah Garcés

Yeah, that's a great place to start. So chickens today are growing so much bigger, so much faster, and so much cheaper than they did 50 years ago. Today, a chicken will get to slaughter weight in about six weeks time. And that's about, probably, three times as fast as it did 50 years ago.

And not only that, where there might have been more an outdoor, free-range setting, 50 years ago, today we have 20, 30, sometimes 50,000 birds packed into one warehouse. So the economy of scale is tremendous, meaning the meat we eat, the chickens we eat, they are paying the price for this overcrowded, fast growth, that causes them a lot of suffering, but means that we're getting this meat so much faster, so much cheaper.

Ezra Klein

Yes, I want to key in on that term, economies of scale. I have this quote from "Meatonomics," which is a very interesting book. But it's about the way that this is all gotten cheaper: "Consolidated and increased output volumes allow producers to enjoy economies of scale." And so I want to get behind this idea of economies of scale. If you read other literature in agricultural economics, you'll hear about efficiencies. These are things you see all over the economy. But they mean very specific things in this case.

So I want to talk about one you just mentioned, where there is a literal trade off of space. How has this space chickens grow to slaughter weight in — which is just is also just a weird term — how has the space that chickens are typically raised in changed, in recent decades?

Leah Garcés

Yeah, I think 50 years ago, you might have seen chickens in people's backyards. Or even if it was a farm that was selling to supermarkets, there might have been each chicken given a much larger amount of space, like let's say 2 to 5 square feet per bird. Today, they're given 3/4 of a square foot per bird, typically, by the industry.

And so each bird — when you go, walk into a warehouse, at the end of their time, of the end of the so-called life cycle, it is wall-to-wall birds. It is sea of white, where the birds can't really move around, can't flap their wings, can't do any of the things they would naturally do. And so they're treated more like widgets in a machine, rather than the sentient beings that they are.

Ezra Klein

Tell me a bit about battery cages. What is a battery cage?

Leah Garcés

Yeah, a battery cage is the cage that is used, typically, for laying hens, to produce eggs. So this is where 6 to 10 birds are put in a barren cage, which doesn't allow for the chickens to exhibit any of their natural behaviors.

So chickens, they're genetically driven to lay their eggs in a nest, for example. Given the opportunity, they would build a nest and lay their egg in a nest. They would also

spend the majority of their time foraging, scratching, pecking. All of those things are denied in a battery cage. It is a barren, wired cage.

And the birds are so overcrowded that they begin to exhibit aggressive behaviors. You can imagine if we were on the Metro, with tons of people all the time, eventually it's going to become an aggressive environment. And so the result is that the animals sometimes peck each other. And the industry, instead of giving the birds more space, their solution is to literally sear off the tip of their beaks so they can do less damage.

So those are some of the ways that battery cages just deny animals these very basic needs that they have. Even if we were to get rid of those cages, I think that it would reduce their suffering. It wouldn't even allow them all the things that they want. But the cages just inherently deny them any of their natural behaviors.

Ezra Klein

How does this make chicken meat, in this case, cheaper?

Leah Garcés

So over time, I think it's this idea of economy of scale. So with the chicken meat, this allowed for the individual animal to no longer be seen as an individual, but a number in a huge machine, a huge mechanism.

So the loss of — let's say, in a big warehouse, where you're raising 20,000 birds, if you lose 200 of those, it doesn't matter as much because you're thinking of the whole thing as a unit that is outputting an amount for the profit. And so over time, the individual animal is lost in this equation. And therefore, they suffer greatly for it.

Ezra Klein

I always think the scale of this is something that is hard to appreciate. So when we step back and you look at all the factory farming, and just all of livestock production, chicken and meat and, for that matter, fish, how many animals are we talking about, a year, being raised for human consumption?

Leah Garcés

Well, globally, there's about 80 billion land animals that are raised and slaughtered every year for human consumption. And that excludes all aquatic animals, so shrimp and lobsters, crabs, fish. And fish are particularly hard to quantify because they're reported in tons. And obviously, an anchovy versus a salmon weighs very different.

So if we just talk about land animals, it's about 80 billion individuals, the majority of which are chickens raised for meat. So about 70 billion of those are just chickens raised for meat, in terms of individuals.

Ezra Klein

So just overwhelmingly, when we're not talking about fish, it's a huge amount of chickens.

Leah Garcés

It's a huge amount of chickens. And I think what is really hard to get your head around is what that means for the individual. And the United States is particularly a contributor to this number. Individual consumption, per capita is around 27 animals per year that a person eats in the United States.

And that's a lot higher than most other countries. So Europe, for example, is around 13 animals per year. So the U.S., in particular, we're high consumers. And we are big contributors to this number.

Ezra Klein

I'm always struck by this number. This is from the U.S.D.A. And it's a bit of a weird number because how much we actually eat versus how much we leave on our plate and throw away, but if you look at the amount of meat we produce, so the amount an average American has access to, is the way they put it, red meat and poultry, beef, pork, turkeys, chickens, et cetera, it's 224.6 pounds of red meat and poultry, on a per-capita basis in 2022. That's the forecast.

Leah Garcés

Yeah.

Ezra Klein

224 pounds is a lot. And you'll hear people say — and it's true that human beings have eaten meat for a really long time, but not this much meat. This is new.

Leah Garcés

It is new. And I think, as a person who has been working to reduce these numbers, the harsh facts, right now, is that last year we saw the highest number of animals, ever in human history, consumed and slaughtered for human consumption. And so that number is going in the wrong direction right now.

And in fact, the F.A.O., which is the Food and Agriculture Organization for the United Nations, predicts that by 2050, when we're close to 10 billion people, that if our consumption patterns remain the same, we're going to have to double the number of animals that we are slaughtering and consuming.

And that's just not sustainable. If you look at the math in terms of arable land in the direction we're headed, it's just not a direction we can go in. And there's a couple of factors that are compounding this. One of them is that overall, human beings are doing really well. We are rising out of poverty. We're moving into the middle class. And when that happens, we eat more animals. So even if individually, people eat less meat, the other factor is there's more humans on the planet. So even if we're eating less as individuals, there's more humans that are eating animals, if that makes sense.

Ezra Klein

Yeah, and — and this is where I want to keep focusing, even though I'm sure we'll wander into different places — and it's getting cheaper. We've made meat into a much more efficient technology.

I always think this is a very strange thing to try to appreciate. But it's something Bruce Friedrich, who's the head of the Good Food Institute, said to me years ago, and I think about often now. You'll hear people say they want to eat natural food, they want to eat real foods. And meat is a real food, and certainly can be. And I'm not going to argue with folks who say Beyond Meat sausage isn't a processed food. It is.

But most of the animals we eat now are treated as technologies. They're pumped full of antibiotics. They're raised in very unnatural conditions. They have been bred in a very certain way that isn't the way they would look or act in the wild, in order to become this cheap.

So I wanted to talk a little bit about that side of it, that acceleration. You mentioned this, when you were talking about chickens, about how they grow to slaughter weight more quickly. Tell me about the literal, biological differences in the chickens we are eating today and the chickens that we have been exposed to through most of human history.

Leah Garcés

Yeah, they're fundamentally different animals, in terms of their physiology, their biology. For example, today, the chickens that we eat, primarily, are grown so big so fast that they collapse under their own weight. And so their muscular-skeletal system is just not designed to keep up with the fast growth of particularly, their breast muscle, which is the part of the animal that Americans and the world likes to eat.

And so their heart, their lung, their muscular-skeletal system can't keep pace with the fast growth of that tissue. And the result is that they really can't survive past six weeks of age. Rarely, they do, when they're runts, or somehow their genetics have been a mutation off of the selective breeding of a fast-growth bird.

But generally they have heart attacks. So something like 5 percent of 70 billion don't make it even to six weeks of age, which is millions and millions of animals can't even make it because they're so metabolically taxed by their genetics. And how this came about is, we selectively bred chickens to grow big and fast only their breast muscle.

So in the same way that we selectively breed dogs for particular traits, the industry bred chickens to have this huge breast. But there were these unintended consequences that caused the animals incredible suffering and death, even before six weeks of age.

Ezra Klein

How long does a chicken live in the wild?

Leah Garcés

It can live years and years. It depends on the breed. So I think that if it's a heritage breed, a breed that will have been from pre-1950s — that's generally the term for a heritage breed — they could live seven or eight or nine years.

And so we really have changed the foundation of what a chicken is. And this means that the kind of meat that people eat has fundamentally changed too. So the meat has more fat than protein content than it used to. It also has very strange things happening, like white striping, which is literally a deterioration of the chicken breast.

And you can see this in the supermarket, where you see these white stripes on the chicken breast. That's not marbling or something that you might equate with steak. That's literally disease on the breast muscle, the deterioration of the breast muscle, as a result of this fast growth.

Ezra Klein

We're talking about this at a bit of a high level, how chickens are structured and what their skeletons are like. But your organization, Mercy for Animals, has done a lot of work, going into these factory farms, filming them, looking at the chickens. What do these chickens look like? What does a farm full of these strangely-bred, breast-heavy chickens look like, when you go in and you see them moving around?

Leah Garcés

Yeah, I've spent a lot of time on industrial chicken farms. And when you walk into a chicken warehouse, which I like to call it a warehouse because I don't feel like it's a farm or a barn — the first thing you'll notice is how immobile the birds are.

So normally, a chicken would be running around, dashing around, foraging, busy, busy, busy, if they were a different breed. But these birds are plopped down, sitting. And how strange it is to see a bird that isn't perching, but plopped down. It is not a natural sight.

And they're laying on the litter. And the only time they get up is to waddle — or sometimes they have to use their wings as almost crutches — to get over to the food and the water. And if you pick up one of these birds, which I almost always do, you'll notice that their chests and wherever they've been in contact with the litter, is red and bare.

And that's because the litter is hot and full of their feces and the feces of their thousands of flock mates, tens of thousands of flock mates. And they're rubbing on it all the time. And so it's like a bed sore.

And so you have a immobile bird, with bedsores, that looks very much, I would say, when she or he stands up, like a marshmallow on toothpicks. It looks strange. They're top heavy. And they lean forward and have very — great difficulty moving around. Depending on the conditions of the warehouse, quite often they're panting because as I said earlier, they're taxed by their physiological constraints.

So they're panting and finding difficulty even in existing. And they're very fragile. They can't exist except at this very, very finite temperature. And if it goes above that or below that, or if they have to get up and walk around or use their body in any way, it's very, very taxing for them.

Ezra Klein

Whenever I touch this subject in a column or in a podcast, one of the reactions I get is, yes, factory farms are terrible but what about all these non-factory farms, or my uncle has this great farm and you should visit it. And I want to note that there are farms out there where animals are raised in a much more ethical way. And I want to talk a bit about how farms have changed or haven't changed.

But I want to ask the broader question, here, which is what percentage of the animals that, let's say, Americans eat, are raised in these more industrial conditions? What percentage are raised in what you would understand as industrial farming or warehousing or production, versus the thing that you see on the packaging, as a farm?

Leah Garcés

Globally, 90 percent of all animals are kept in industrial animal farms. In the United States, it's 99 percent. Virtually all farmed animals in the United States are kept in industrial animal agriculture.

Ezra Klein

And how do you define industrial animal agriculture? Because 99 percent, I think, is a surprising number. Don't people go to Whole Foods; they get cage-free eggs; they get grass-fed beef, et cetera, et cetera? I mean, 99 percent is a lot.

Leah Garcés

So I will say that a place where we're moving in the right direction is cage-free eggs. So about a third of production in the United States is now cage free. And that's, in large part, because of the pressure campaigns we've been putting on companies to shift away from battery cages to no cages. And that's a really great thing for the animals, where their suffering is reduced.

However, that's still an industrial setting. It's not the end game. It's not the place where we want to stop because animals are still kept in places where the majority of their natural behavior is being denied. So when I say industrial animal agriculture, I mean kept entirely indoors, in overcrowded settings in which they have to be given antibiotics or they have to have very managed circumstances because they're fragile, because of the circumstances they're being kept in, which denies them the majority of their natural behaviors.

Ezra Klein

I want to put a pin in antibiotics because we're going to go there in a second, much to my horror. But I want to hold you here because I think this question of cage free is interesting. Your group and other groups have done remarkable work, getting a lot of producers, getting a lot of big restaurant chains and grocery chains to commit to cage-free eggs.

What does that actually mean? How much better is that life for a chicken? And what is not achieved that maybe a consumer thinks is achieved when they see the term cage-free egg, or cage-free raising?

Leah Garcés

If you are interested in the good life of a chicken, I think you have to delve really deep into where do your values fall. And there are animal welfare certifications that will tell you exactly where and how the animals are living. So just cage free just means exactly that — they're not in cages. But otherwise, they're still in a warehouse. And there are not really elaborate standards beyond that.

So if you are interested in them having natural light, outdoor access, you would have to go to an animal welfare certification, such as at Whole Foods, with the Global Animal Partnership, that might stipulate they have to have outdoor access, they have to have a perch, they have to have a scratching area, they have to have nests. So cage free does not automatically mean a life worth living for a chicken. It just means reduce suffering against the standard of a caged system.

Ezra Klein

We've been talking here, mostly, about chickens, which I think is reasonable because most of the land animals we eat are chickens. But I want to use one other example of this space trade off that leads to lower prices, which is gestation crates. Can you tell me a bit about them?

Leah Garcés

Yeah, gestation crates. This is just a barrel of laughs.

Ezra Klein

These are my most fun podcasts. People really enjoy them. They share them with their friends. They all get together and listen. [LAUGHS]

Leah Garcés

I think it's so important for people to know about this because this is where your bacon comes from. This is where your sausage comes from. This is where your ribs come from.

And gestation crates are a system where pregnant pigs are kept in a metal crate so small that the pregnant pig is unable to turn around at all. She faces one direction

her entire existence. And she can't even lay down very easily and has to kind of heave herself against the bars to be able to lay down. It's very, very challenging.

The underneath of her is cold concrete that's often wet, with slatted floors, to allow for her waist to go through. And this is the entirety of her pregnancy is like this. And even after that, when she gives birth to her piglets, she's kept in something called a farrowing crate.

And it's very similar, except that there's a little bit of space on one side. But she's still contained in a crate. But there's another space on the other side of the crate where her piglets can move in and out. And she's essentially this milking machine for her piglets.

And then one day her piglets are taken away and taken off to what's called a nursery, which is not what it seems like by that name. And she's left alone. And then she has to begin again.

And I just want to tell one story from a recent undercover investigation we did, just last month, where we investigated gestation crates. And the investigator went in that morning. And this mother was literally screaming. Pigs scream. And she was screaming and screaming and screaming. And she wouldn't stop.

And the investigator asked what was happening. The investigator was told, the mother's piglets had been taken away that morning. And so she was suffering from not only, where are my piglets, where are my babies, but also just the biological feeling of having all this milk with nowhere to go.

And she was bashing her face against the bars over and over and over again, in this kind of torment that she was in, emotionally and physically. And that's just one story from one pig. And this happens over and over and over again. This is normalized atrocity in our society.

Ezra Klein

And why? Why is a gestation crate helpful for the production of bacon?

Leah Garcés

The most basic answer is farmers in the industry find it easier to manage the pigs like this. They can keep the animals in this way. They argue that it keeps the animals from having miscarriages.

But of course, in biology or in evolutionary terms, that just doesn't make sense. If the animals were given what they need and want when they're giving birth, then they would not have these issues.

So I've had the extreme joy of watching a mother pig get ready to give birth, where they love and need and want to build a nest. And they will go out of their way. They'll leave their herd, and they'll build these elaborate nests, with ferns and flowers and very individualized nests to give birth. And in giving birth in that nest, they create a protective space for their piglets.

So they're replacing the pigs natural needs and wants, to build this nest, to protect their animals, with an artificial crate, that denies her all of those things but still gives this output. And it allows them to do it in mass. It allows them to do crate after crate after crate after crate, in rows and rows and rows, and not give the animals that space. So it allows you to produce a lot of piglets, through a lot of sows, in a very rapid way, in a small area. But of course, the animals paid the ultimate price for that.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra Klein

On a move to talking about antibiotics, which is something you mentioned a couple of minutes ago — and I also want to make this transition because I think up until here — we're having a standard — I mean, horrifying but standard conversation about how animals pay the cost for cheap meat, where we are basically treating their suffering — it's an — to use economics term — an externality. Their suffering is not priced into the meat.

But there's a lot of human suffering and a lot of human risk in the way we're raising animals right now. And in particular, one statistic always just floors me, which is that about 70 percent of all medically-important antibiotics in the US are sold for use in animals. So about 70 percent of medically-important antibiotics are actually used in animals. Why?

Leah Garcés

It's such an infuriating number. Yeah, it's around 70 percent these days. Somewhere along the way, the industry discovered that antibiotics can promote growth and help the animals grow even faster. And essentially, animals are kept in such horrifically poor conditions that they could not survive without the aid of antibiotics.

Ezra Klein

So this goes to one of these places where, when people say white meat, because it's natural, I always wonder what's being said here because this is a way in which naturally, there would be a check on how we can treat and raise animals. In anything close to a state of nature, anything close to the way human beings have raised animals for eons, if you put this many animals this close together, disease rips through the flock and the flock dies.

And so there's actually natural balances on how you can treat animals. You have to treat them with a certain amount of respect and space and in accordance with how they would be out there on their own for them to survive. And we have found a way around that.

But we found a way around that at some cost. It seems — the great fear here is that antibiotics, which very arguably are the signal invention of the last 200 years of human civilization — nothing is more important, on some level, than antibiotics — and antibiotics lose potency over time if we overuse them because bacteria learns how to mutate around them.

And we're seeing a rise in antibiotic resistance. And we're still pumping animals full of the antibiotics we need to use. Can you talk a bit about the risks, not for animals here, but for humans?

Leah Garcés

The risks are tremendous. We could be entering a pre-antibiotic phase again, where a simple cut could result in death. And I'm not exaggerating because pre the invention or the discovery of antibiotics, that is exactly what would happen to someone — is they would get a simple scratch, it would get infected, that infection would lead to fever, death.

And I'll just give you an example, in my own personal life, where my grandmother got a scratch on her toe, and that turned into a mutli-drug resistant infection that could not be solved with antibiotics. And the solution was that she had to have her toe amputated.

And this becoming more common, where simple injuries or simple illnesses, our antibiotics no longer are serving. And that's a very scary prospect, I think, that we underestimate how that could really change our lives and how we would live it. And we should really know that, post pandemic, what it would be like to not have the medicines for basic infections.

Ezra Klein

One of the things I think about is the years in which people were saying, pre pandemic, there will be a pandemic respiratory flu, this is going to happen, it's going to happen, it's going to be bad. When I ran Vox, we did a piece and a video with Bill Gates about it. We had Ron Klain, who had been the ebola czar, writing about it.

Everybody knew this was coming. And they didn't see that it was coronavirus as quickly as they should have. But it came. And one of the lessons to me is that when something's coming, it's probably going to come. And antibiotic resistance is one of these that always sits in the back of my mind as the truly scary ones because they keep telling us it's coming.

So to flush what you just said out with some numbers, every 15 minutes, right now, in the U.S., someone dies because of an infection that antibiotics can no longer effectively treat. And there was a study commissioned by the UK government which estimated that by 2050, 10 million people a year could die of drug-resistant disease if we don't make drastic change to how we use antibiotics, 10 million.

Now animals are not the only way in which we're overusing antibiotics, by any means. But they are a major way. And 70 percent is a big number. And this just feels, to me, like a place where this looks cheap, but in the long run, may be very expensive.

If you go and you buy a burger or ground meat or chicken at the store right now, most people, unless you're buying antibiotic-free meat, are not paying the possible future cost of a world in which a lot of our antibiotics have become useless.

Leah Garcés

Yeah, absolutely. And I think part of the challenge for the industry, why they don't want to do this, is because it would require them to change not just the conditions, but the genetics of the animals. And they would have to think about selectively breeding animals that have robust immune systems, which would be healthier, more natural, and be able to survive.

Or I should say they should also change the circumstances in which the animals are being raised in. So it's twofold, where they'd have to improve the conditions and the environment, and they'd have to improve the genetics and think about this in terms of the way the animals are being raised for our food system.

Ezra Klein

But that's not impossible. It's just more expensive.

Leah Garcés

Right. I think it's an important subject of this podcast today, is that, frankly, the industry has created these problems. And so the industry needs to solve them and pay for them. And they need to internalize these externalized costs, where they're forcing, through these choices of poor conditions, poor genetics, poor immune systems, they're forcing us to pay for it in other ways, through antibiotic resistance and death.

And that needs to be internalized. They need to improve the conditions. They need to improve the genetics so that the cost is incurred within the system, rather than always pushed out.

Ezra Klein

We're talking about the diseases antibiotics can treat. So that's bacterial. But we've obviously been living through, or are living through a pretty bad viral pandemic — pretty bad [LAUGHS] unbelievably horrific viral pandemic. And one of the things

that is terrifying here is the Petri dishes that the way we raise animals creates for viruses.

You can actually go — the government, the CDC — tracks viruses of particular concern. And if you go and look at it, it's just avian flu, avian flu, avian flu, swine flu, swine flu, avian flu, swine flu. And it's this constant repetition of viruses that are spreading among birds and pigs, specifically, that we are worried can, or in some cases already have, mutate to become transmissible or lethal to human beings. So can you talk a bit about that interface of what we call the zoonotic diseases?

Leah Garcés

Yeah, zoonotic disease, in its basic idea, is that we get diseases from other animals. And animal agriculture is really ripe for this infectious pathway, where a pathogen, like a disease, would jump from an animal to humans. And we already have seen this. We're just been lucky so far.

So you mentioned swine flu, which is H1N1. There's Nipah virus. There's all these avian flus, some of which are highly pathogenic, linked to farmed animals. And we've seen the impact of these and the disease they cause, both respiratory and neurological diseases, especially from pigs, which are more closely genetically linked to us than chickens are.

And our solution to this is mass culling, or killing, of these animals when we see a disease outbreak like this. But because of the conditions they're kept in, there is this opportunity for the disease to magnify very quickly. And then if you add in the fact that animals are transported, then you have a vehicle for getting them everywhere. And if you add in the fact that human beings are walking in and out of these facilities, you have another vehicle.

So it's a very, very dangerous situation where we're rolling the dice faster and faster and faster. And it really is a matter of when, not if. That's what many, many experts say about factory farms and the conditions.

So if you add into that the fact that these animals are not genetically robust, that they're kept in these dark, unsanitary, overcrowded factory farms that really stresses out their immune system, and they're from a genetic makeup that is not robust, they

are just excellent transmitters for disease in overcrowded, diseased, dirty conditions. So it's a terrible situation that zoonotic diseases are ripe for infiltrating.

Ezra Klein

Let's talk about another looming, predictable threat, which is climate change. Livestock farming, largely due to cows, is responsible for, depending on the estimate you look at, but one I think is credible is about 14.5 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. 14.5 percent is a lot. But we don't talk about cows all that often. So first, why? Why does farming, specifically cows, lead to so much greenhouse-gas emissions?

Leah Garcés

So cows emit methane. And then that methane is a contributor to greenhouse-gas emissions. But there's been more recent estimates that that's a vast underestimation. So there was actually an article by George Monbiot, in The Guardian, saying the estimates could be as high as 25 percent, 26 percent when you account for all the animals and their contribution to greenhouse-gas emissions.

So it's really such a huge contributor to greenhouse-gas emissions, to climate change. And it's largely absent from our policy discussions. So COP27 is happening. And the discussion around animal agriculture is largely absent, which means we won't reach our goals if it isn't incorporated, it isn't seen as part of the main problem.

Ezra Klein

You mentioned methane. And I think, obviously, that's a big part of it. And so you get into this — people would be like, oh, yeah, the cow burps and the cow farts. But it's also land use.

I always find the land-use numbers, here, genuinely mind boggling. This comes from "Our World in Data," blessed be their name. "Half of the world's ice and desert-free land is used for agriculture. Most of this is for raising livestock." Half of the ice and desert-free land is agriculture, most of it for livestock. That is wild. Why so much land? And how does that play into the climate question?

Leah Garcés

So a third of our arable land is used to just raise crops to feed farmed animals. And so when you think about the land that is being used to farm animals, people often just think about the space a farm animal is actually on. But that is the tip of the iceberg because all of those animals need soy and maize to survive.

So somewhere else is giant plots of land that are being dedicated just to raise feed for farmed animals. And when you put that all together — there was a paper that came out recently that said something like animal-based agriculture and feed crop production actually account for more than 80 percent of all agriculture land, used globally. And that also is a huge contributor to deforestation. So it is a massive contributor to land use.

So when we talk about greenhouse-gas emissions, I think it's so limited because we often just think about cows and their farts and their burps. And then we think, well, we'll solve the problem by either putting a tax on cows or reducing our dairy and our beef consumption. But that is not the entire picture.

Since I said earlier, 70 billion, or 90 percent of all farmed animals are chickens, well, there's tons of land, tons of deforestation happening, in order to feed chickens, to feed pigs, beyond the initial calculations we do around climate change related to greenhouse-gas emissions. We need a much bigger scope when we look at the environmental impact of factory farming, beyond just greenhouse-gas emissions.

Ezra Klein

So this is where we get to questions of efficiency, in a weird way. I want to read a couple more stats from this, from "Our World in Data," here. Quote, "the land use of livestock is so large because it takes around 100 times as much land to produce a kilo calorie of beef or lamb versus plant-based alternatives." So 100 times as much land to produce a calorie of beef or lamb versus a calorie of plant. Same is true for protein, they write. It takes almost 100 times as much land to produce a gram of protein from beef or lamb versus peas or tofu.

And so the big reveal here — and I want to say that this is much more of a show about the cost of meat, rather than why you should be vegetarian. That's a decision

you can make for yourself — but that if everyone shifted to a plant-based diet, we would reduce global land use for agriculture by 75 percent.

When I say those numbers, what I would think, then, is that it would be unbelievably more expensive to get burgers than to get veggie burgers, or unbelievably more expensive to get burgers than to get a brick of tofu. And it really isn't. So why is it so inefficient to make calories through animals? And then why isn't that netting out to more expense in making calories from animals?

Leah Garcés

Yeah it's a super inefficient system, where we are using a giant piece of land to raise food for farmed animals, when we could have been using that land to feed ourselves directly, in a much more sustainable and — in a way that could not jeopardize our future food system. Because there's a limited amount of arable land, we know that arable land, that topsoil, is disappearing.

It should be top of the agenda to be thinking, how are we going to use this land? We shouldn't be using it to feed animals in factory farms that then feed us. We should just go directly to the source. We should go use the land directly, or at least do a major reduction and think through that much better.

And I do think if we don't have policies that intervene soon, we're going to get to a crisis point, where we'll be forced to solve this problem. And we don't want to get to that point. We want to do it before we're in a crisis.

I think the question of why isn't meat really expensive is the exact idea of externalities. And what the industry has done — and this is — there are probably five to seven ways they've externalized this, and environment is just one — is they've taken all of these risks, these liabilities. And they've majority externalized those costs. So the industry doesn't pay for any of those externalized costs.

And they're pushed into the most vulnerable among us. So we talked about the animals but it goes way beyond that. There's a payment for the damage or harm done. And at the core of what we're talking about is that these are all hidden from us. And we're not even actively consenting in this harm caused. It's hidden. And so we're not active players.

And I think that's one of the most disturbing things because logically, you're k, why doesn't meat cost more? Because the cost is hidden. It's paid for not at the transactional moment, but by a third party that's being harmed, somewhere in the process. And the industry has externalized all of those harms, all of those liabilities and risks.

Ezra Klein

Let me give an example of this because I think it sounds a little bit abstract, but it's really — it's very, very concrete. So the election in Brazil, Bolsonaro and Lula. And Bolsonaro just lost. And you might have heard a lot of people say that this election was crucial for the climate because it was crucial for the rainforest. And the reason it was crucial for the rainforest was that Bolsonaro was clear cutting the rainforest at functionally, a record rate.

And it doesn't cost that much to cut down a bunch of rainforest. And then you make money by raising cows there. But in addition to all the million things that biodiversity and ecosystems do for us, one thing they do is a trap a bunch of carbon. And if you clear cut the rainforest, you release that carbon. You remove the capacity to trap more carbon in the future, et cetera, et cetera.

And so that's a place where it looks cheap because all of a sudden there's more land to raise cows. But in fact, the cost is being paid by everyone who will suffer from future global warming. And that would not be in the price of a burger.

But to your point about not consenting, that's not anywhere in the transaction. You go into Safeway. You buy some meat because your family needs dinner. And this whole thing happening in the rainforest is totally absent from it. It's not priced in. It's not mentioned. There's no way to really know about it. And this is happening a million different ways up and down the production chain.

I want to give another one that we often see here. We can talk about climate change forever. But air particulates, pollution, kills about 9 million people each year, now. It's unbelievably devastating. We way underrate how bad it is. It also causes lung cancer, emphysema, strokes, heart attacks, cognitive decline. And factory farms

contribute to that too. Tell me about factory farms and air pollution, and where that does or doesn't show up in the cost structure?

Leah Garcés

Yeah, it's another example of an externality, that is where someone else is paying a price, or paying for harm and damage that's not at the transactional moment. So for all of these farms, what you have is a highly-concentrated area of animals producing waste in an unnaturally small space. And that is emitted into the air.

With chickens, for example, it's high concentrations of ammonia and dust particles that are released into the environment, where the animals are, but then out through fans, and into the neighborhoods around this farm.

The same goes for a hog farm. And hog farms have particularly been in the news lately because what they do is, the hog waste — so pigs are kept on slatted, concrete floors. The waste goes into a pipe that goes into what's called a lagoon, which is a euphemism for a cesspool.

And the cesspool collects all of this waste from the pigs. It becomes this urine, feces, liquid pool. And then it gets too full. And the solution is to spray it into the air and spray it into fields.

And what has happened is it's usually sprayed in low-income areas. And that spray ends up on people's clothing lines, on their mailboxes, even inside their homes. And I can tell particular stories from low-income communities that have been affected by this in severe ways, leading to respiratory infections and generally, just a really bad quality of life.

Ezra Klein

Tell me about the North Carolina communities that have sued.

Leah Garcés

Yeah, so I spent a fair bit of time in Eastern North Carolina, which has been impacted by the hog industry. And this is an area where people were enslaved. And people were, at some point, freed, given land, got land, earned land somehow. And

these families, generation to generation, stayed on this land. And it was a point of pride. It's a point of importance.

And around the 1980s, the hog industry started to move in around these low-income, mostly-Black communities, and set up hog farms. And the particular county that I've spent some time in is in Duplin County, which has the highest concentration — one of the highest concentrations of hog farms anywhere in the country. And it's mostly Smithfield.

And there are community members there that, day to day, live across from a field where hog farmers are spraying hog waste onto the fields. And of course, the waste turns into mist, into spray. The wind blows. And it ends up on their clotheslines, on their front porches, on their cars.

Now this has severely impacted not just the quality of life, but the health of these people. And they have less agency, less political power, less economic power to fight this industry, and have suffered severely for it.

But recently, there was one of the biggest lawsuits which resulted in Smithfield being — the first price tag on this was nearly half a billion dollars of a lawsuit. And there were trials. And all of them convicted Smithfield, and found them guilty of what they called nuisance, nuisances from flies and smell.

But that was then reduced. And the state passed a law, meaning a case like this can never happen again. And from the individual perspective — there were hundreds of plaintiffs in this case. And some of them, I have met. And one of them is Renee Miller.

And Renee Miller suffers from severe respiratory chronic infections. And even after this, the lawsuit, she's still a bus driver. She's retirement age. And this lawsuit only was able to cover her medical fees. And she still lives next to a hog farm that is spraying in fields. So she doesn't go out her front door. She is nervous to walk around because now she's stood up to this industry.

So I think in general terms, when you look at a map at how the industry has set itself up, it seems intentional that they've set up in places where people have less agency

to fight against these externalities being put upon them. And this is something we should be concerned about because if these farms were located in the middle of a city, and these pollutions, these smells — if hog waste was being sprayed on the state capital, it would stop in a day.

But because it's in low-income folks' areas, with less political agency, less social capital, they are less able to fight this. And the industry is able to get away with it because of that.

Ezra Klein

I think that's such an important point about the geographic dimension of this and the power dimension of it. Yeah, nobody's going to put this in San Francisco. And I also want to just note what you said about, then, the legislature passing a law so Smithfield couldn't be — and other corporations like it couldn't be sued in the same way — because that just literally keeps this out of the prices.

I want to keep coming back to this, that the legal system tried to put at least some of this in the pricing. So the amount of pain they are causing these communities should be in the price. They have to pay a legal fee. They lose lawsuits. And they had enough power to pass a law saying, nope, that is not going to be allowed. We've been talking about air pollution. Before we move on from it, though, I want to note it's not just air pollution. Tell me about the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico.

Leah Garcés

So if you think about what I said earlier, about all the soy and the maize that has grown to feed factory-farmed animals, primarily in the Midwest of the United States, Nebraska, let's say, that crop is sprayed with a lot of fertilizer. And that land gets saturated with that nutrients. And that nutrients then flows. And when it rains, it overflows into the Mississippi River.

And then it flows down the Mississippi River into the Gulf of Mexico. And the Gulf of Mexico now has what is called a dead zone, which is the size of Rhode Island, which is essentially a desert in the ocean, where no animals, no life, can exist as normal in an ocean. And I actually had the opportunity to go and see this with my own eyes where I went out —

Ezra Klein

The opportunity, huh?

Leah Garcés

The opportunity, I know.

Ezra Klein

Lucky you.

Leah Garcés

I know. I swam in the dead zone. I jumped off a boat and I swam in the dead zone. And it was so strange because actually, what happened is all the life that should be at the bottom of the ocean had moved up to the top, what could live at the top.

And that meant you saw fish and jellyfish and animals you really wouldn't normally see at the surface. And also, what's happened is all the animals have moved further out. So shrimp, for example, have entirely moved out of this area because at the bottom of the ocean, it has no oxygen. It has no life.

And that is a direct result from the flow of nutrients from the pollution that is coming from the feed, which is going into factory farms. And dead zones are a global problem. That's just one example. But this is where we're choking out our oceans in order to raise animals in factory farms.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra Klein

You've done a lot of work with farmers. You've created these very interesting and unusual coalitions of vegans and farmers. And the nature of the coalition has been, as I understand it, and we've talked about it before, that as you've had these massive corporations come to control the meat market.

They have put a lot of pressure on farmers to raise animals and conduct their business in a way that is, in addition to being inhumane to the animals and maybe to the environment, also quite inhumane to the farmers, and has changed what they do

into something they don't recognize, they don't support, they can't make a decent living at. Can you talk a bit about how the drive to lower prices on meat has changed the work of being a small farmer of pigs or chickens or cows or whatever?

Leah Garcés

Yeah, I think this is another example of where the industry has externalized all the risks and the liabilities. So the farmer has to purchase the land, all of the equipment, all of the housing. So that would be a huge cost that puts them in a huge amount of debt.

So a farmer takes out a debt, like a mortgage, and then has to pay that off year after year after year. And because they're in these low areas of income opportunity, the only way to pay off that debt is to keep raising animals and keep paying that debt off.

And so you have, collectively in the United States, just for chickens, you have $5.2 billion worth of debt that is the farmer's debt — not the industry that is benefiting and profiting, but the actual, individual family farmer. And they are held hostage by this debt.

And in fact, that debt is so catastrophic for our rural communities and for farmers. And suicide is a huge problem. And farmers are among the most likely to die by suicide in comparison to other occupations. Not only that, but the nature of their job is not what we think of as farming.

So a chicken farmer is really a chicken babysitter, where their job is to go through these warehouses and look for birds that are dead or dying, and hand kill them, and then put them in an incinerator or bury them or do something with those bodies, and just keep them alive until six weeks is over. And then the company comes and collects them. And then they get paid for how many birds survived this system.

That's their job. That's a horrible job. No one wakes up and thinks, that's my dream job. But when they get into it, it's sold to them, like you're going to be an independent farmer, you're going to be your own business. But what happens, in reality, is they're indentured servants doing a horrific, horrific job that no one wants to do.

Ezra Klein

Tell me a bit about the farmers you've met, doing this work, and what they've told you about it because you've got to be a weird confessor for them, this long-term, radical, vegan, animal activist, and now you're running — or helping with coalitions of farmers. What do they tell you?

Leah Garcés

What is most surprising is that most of these farmers are so surprised that I want to hear their story. They're so used to just going it alone and just not complaining. I talked to so many farmers who don't end up being a public story, but just need to confess, almost like therapy, to talk about the hardships they face.

And they're surprisingly not antagonistic toward me. And that's my bad for having that assumption about them. And that's something we have to overcome, realizing that there's a true allyship to be made, with factory farmers, as people trying to get rid of factory farms, that they don't want the system any more than we do. And they would really like us to come up and help them transition to an alternative, which is what we're trying to do now.

And working with individual farmers, we've managed to transition some farms to hemp, to mushrooms. We're working on a greenhouse model where we're doing specialty mushrooms, or microgreens, strawberries, tomatoes. And I think these farmers are actually quite ripe for having help to transition. And they're very innovative, very hardworking, and very collaborative, in a way I find very unexpected.

Ezra Klein

Let me ask you about the other side of that, which is the ways in which we, as taxpayers, all of us, me, you, subsidize the system as it exists now.

Leah Garcés

There's two ways we pay. We've been talking a lot about externalities, where it's like paying for the harm of the system. But even before that, we are paying to prop up a business that wouldn't survive without government support.

And there are so many examples of this. So subsidies is this really broad term for government money, somehow helping an industry survive, when it otherwise probably wouldn't. And I have some really concrete examples.

For example, in the chicken industry, in 2011, the US purchased $40 million worth of chicken from the industry when they overproduced, when they got it wrong and they produced too much. So the government purchased that glut and then reported that it would donate it to federal food assistance, such as like a soup kitchen or the Feeding America programs. And that's not the first time. That's something we typically do with our tax dollars. Our tax dollars will pay for this overproduction.

And we saw it most recently during Covid, where the government sent poultry and livestock producers $270 million worth of pandemic assistance. They also paid $40 million for the population of pigs and chickens, which is just a euphemism for mass, inhumane slaughter of animals on the farm, usually by —

Ezra Klein

Depopulation is a hell of a euphemism.

Leah Garcés

It really is. They've got some smart marketing people, I'll tell you. But the population is where they, in mass, inhumanely, slaughter animals right on the farm. And they usually do that through ventilation shutdown. And that's exactly what it sounds like.

They just turn off the ventilators. And then it gets hotter and hotter. And they literally cook in there and suffocate. That's the standard way.

They also will foam the animals. So they just spray a foam in there. And the animals will suffocate.

These are normal. This happened during Covid. And actually, our tax dollar paid $40 million for that. And what we want, at Mercy for Animals, is to say, why did we pay for that? The industry should pay for that. The industry should be accountable for that.

In any other business, if that happened, you would pay for that. It's a fragile system. And the industry needs to pay when that sort of problem happens, not the taxpayer, who would never want to have their tax dollars paying for the live cooking, in a warehouse, through suffocation. No one would want that.

Ezra Klein

You said, a few times, where the industry wouldn't survive without these subsidies. And there are a lot of subsidies we can talk about. But it doesn't seem to be true that the system would collapse without it. It just — what it couldn't be is the thing it currently is. It couldn't be this cheap, with this little downside risk, with this kind of capacity to overproduce, without really paying the cost of it, that there's something here about the way we have allowed this particular system to emerge, where we get a lot of meat very, very cheaply, with a lot of externalities that aren't priced in.

And it's a remarkable thing to me, how whenever things go too badly, or whenever, even, the public decides to try to weigh in, you often see the industry wield enough political power, or legal power, to protect themselves from the public, from the demos, saying, maybe we don't want to do it just this way. Can you talk a bit on that point, about Prop 12 in California, and the lawsuit that is now in front of the Supreme Court over it?

Leah Garcés

So Prop 12 was passed in 2018 in California. 65 percent of voters voted in favor of it. And what it did was it banned the production and sale of any products where there was extreme close confinement for pregnant pigs, for laying hens, and for veal calves.

And this is meant to come into effect. But the pork industry decided that they were going to fight this. And they fought it, even though in two different courts, it was deemed constitutional. They continue to appeal. And it was brought up to the Supreme Court.

And on Oct. 11, the Supreme Court, for the first time in our nation's history, had oral arguments heard about an animal welfare system. And the pork industry wants to overturn Prop 12, meaning deny the 65 percent of voters, the majority of

Californians, who wanted this, deny them what they wanted, and want in their state, and overturn it, and allow for pigs to be kept in these horrible conditions, laying hens to be kept in these horrible conditions, et cetera.

Ezra Klein

Two things about this that are, I guess, worth noting. One is that the Biden administration has weighed in on the pork industry's behalf. And the other is that it's one of these very frustrating cases where it's at least not being argued on the grounds you would think.

It's not about is this too cruel to exist or anything like that. It's about whether or not Prop 12 is so sweeping that it actually nets out to California regulating everybody because California is so big that if you've got to produce your pigs this way for California, maybe you're really producing them this way for everybody. And as such, California's doing something with interstate commerce.

And I get it, on some level. I recognize that you can run thought experiments about how this kind of state regulation could be used as de facto national regulation. But still, there's something really profoundly unsettling about — on the one hand, I mean the oral arguments really do deal seriously with the suffering of these animals. And on the other hand, the argument is that the suffering of the animals is irrelevant to the legal question, which is should a state like California be able to impose this kind of stricture, with the possibility that it will affect what producers do for other states.

There's just another place where it feels like we managed to, very, very rapidly, abstract away from at this point something so horrible that a very, very large majority of Californians weighed in, in the face of a very large campaign, telling them, correctly, that it would raise their prices if something like this passed. They weighed in and said, we don't want to produced this way. We're willing to pay more. And it still might get overturned. The whole thing is maddening.

Leah Garcés

It is maddening. And the Biden administration did weigh in. And it's very disappointing. They sided with the pork industry.

And the pork industry has argued — their main argument is that this is a negligible change, and it is burdensome. Those are their two core arguments.

It is anything but negligible for the animals, who, as I've already described, when they're kept in gestation crates, are kept in these horrific conditions. And removing or requiring a certain space allocation would d is anything but negligible for these animals. It's quite the opposite. It's quite meaningful.

And it's not burdensome. It's burdensome, maybe, to the monopoly that the National Pork Council wants to hold over the industry because so many farmers have already started to transition to crate-free systems and invest in that. They're just not in that core group, in the National Pork Producers Council.

There are lots of farmers that are transitioning, embracing, and wanting to move in this direction, where they're getting rid of crates. They're moving in that direction, to meet the demand, to meet what voters wanted.

And you can really see in the Supreme Court oral arguments — and there's 157-page transcript on this, which to me, reads like a John Grisham novel, that is fascinating — an indicator of where we're at. And you see the Supreme Court questioning, well, it doesn't mean that you have to sell to California. There are other farmers willing to sell to California, who want to meet this standard.

Why is this a violation? Why is this so burdensome? And it's because of this monopoly or this stronghold that part of the industry wants to hold over the market. They don't want to let go. They want to maintain this dominant way of production.

And I think the other thing that's so interesting about the oral hearings, which I think allows us an opening on this, is that it did not fall on party lines at all. It was all over the map. And I think this speaks to the fact that this issue speaks to both core values within both the progressive and the conservative landscape. And I think that's a rare opportunity in our world, in our political landscape.

This doesn't fall on party lines. There's values that this speaks to on both sides that we should lean into. And no matter what happens with the Supreme Court outcome — and we'll hear within a month to six months — it's a real learning moment for us.

And it's a really important moment, that the Supreme Court took the time, and sat down, and didn't just talk — if you listen to the arguments, they didn't just talk about the constitutionality of this. They also talked about the morality of this system. And I think that's very important for us to be paying attention to.

Ezra Klein

But I do just want to note, because my confidence in the Supreme Court is not super high, and if this gets overturned, which also, forget — putting aside the Supreme Court, the Biden administration is saying it should be overturned — then what will have happened is Californians will have said, we should put better animal treatment into the price.

And the Biden administration and the Supreme Court will have said, no, you cannot. We will not allow it. We will not allow this to show up in the price. And we will not allow you to say that you cannot sell something, where you have externalized this much suffering onto the animals. So I just find that — to just be blunt, abhorrent.

Leah Garcés

I agree 100 percent.

Ezra Klein

I want to end on something that's fuzzier, but is something on my mind because I have a 3 and 1/2 year old. And we're starting to have to talk about this with him. And it's tricky.

And one of — I mean, he's got all these storybooks of animals. And we have dogs. And he's been to farms, and also, wants to eat what his friends are eating. And we're softer on that. And you can have what you want, but we try to explain. And has recently started trying to ask people if the meat they're eating is from plants because also, it's confusing for a little kid now because we do eat a lot of things — we eat burgers and nuggets and all the rest of it. It's just from plants.

And something I've been thinking of as a cost, but not one that I'm saying should ever show up in a price, is just what it means to teach yourself to not look at suffering you know is there.

Leah Garcés

Yeah. I have three kids. And they're all vegan. And so is my husband. I try to think of it more as developing their compassion muscle. And compassion, it's an infinite muscle. It's not something that there's only a limited amount of compassion you can have.

And in developing a compassion muscle, you develop the ability to have compassion for other beings, for other situations, for anything. And farmed animals and the way we eat is just a very direct impact we can have.

And frankly, it's one of the things that attracted me to this movement. It's not your typical social justice or you're correct a wrong, like a — let's say a simple concept might be change a light bulb to an LED light bulb. That's a set-and-forget concept. Or maybe racial injustice is really hard to think about what do I do day to day.

But with farmed animals and your eating choices, you have this amazing opportunity, three times a day, to have agency in the situation. So I try to think of it as this positive agency you have in the world to make a difference. And that's a very great feeling — that I'm making a change, I'm a positive actor, and I can think compassionately in this direct way, three times a day.

And our job is to continually grow our circle of compassion, our moral circle of compassion. And I think it's a very long arc of justice and compassion that we're working towards. But at the end of that arc, where we've totally expanded that circle of compassion, is where we will be the best version of ourselves, as a species. And I try to think of it like that, rather than all the difficulty in it, but rather, as the growth opportunity that we have as a species, as individuals, as children.

Ezra Klein

Let me ask what you think is tractable here, because human beings have eaten meat forever. We are going to eat meat, I think, for certainly the foreseeable, imaginable future. So the point here is not that everybody listening should turn vegan or something. Although if you want to, great.

But there is a space between there and here that is just more ethical. It is a space we have been in for most of human history. I'm not somebody who thinks — and I know this is controversial in some circles — but I'm not somebody who thinks that intrinsically, killing animals for food is wrong.

I think there are — it's very easy to imagine the cow or the pig or the chicken that had a better life existing and eventually becoming food than not existing. And most of nature works that way anyway. But factory farming, industrial farming, the way we treat the animals, is not, I think, defensible.

When you imagine a path just towards a better equilibrium, just towards a place where people still eat meat, but it probably costs a bit more, and on the other side of that, it is more humane and more sustainable, and better for the environment, and better for the people who farm it and work in the slaughterhouses and so on, what feels like the modest steps from here to there? What feels doable here, as opposed to this being so big that, aside from my own personal decision making, I can't imagine having an effect on it?

Leah Garcés

Yeah, I think internalizing a lot of these costs, through regulation, would be a really good step — so banning the worst practices and slowing down the line speeds at the slaughterhouses, not allowing for the pollution, or putting a tax on that, all of that will cause the price to be internalized. And the industry should pay for that. What will happen is the meat will become more expensive. And then demand will go down because our consumption — and we know, through patterns throughout history, our pattern is that when prices go down, we eat more, when they go up, we eat less. So a really important first step is internalizing these costs through regulations, possibly through taxes, and causing the price of meat to be closer to what it might be.

And that would cause a severe, reduction, hopefully in consumption. And that would be a good first step, where we had higher standards all round, whether it be environment, communities, the labor force, or animal welfare, higher standards that cause the price of meat, eggs, and dairy to be more, causing the demand to go down. I think that would be a first good step towards an equilibrium.

Ezra Klein

One question I always get, when I do a show like this, is what about dramatically different kinds of farming, like regenerative agriculture? What would it look like, what would the costs look like, what would the consumption patterns look like, do you imagine it would look like if we moved, as much as possible, towards things that are regenerative? What is regenerative? When people say that, what kinds of meat could it plausibly cover? And then, what is actually being said? What does that price-consumption world look like?

Leah Garcés

Regenerative is a newer philosophy on how we should be farming, which is really focused on soil and soil health and soil regeneration. So if you think of sustainability, it's like keeping things as they are. We don't want that. Things are terrible.

We want to regenerate. We want to create top soil, create healthy soil so we can have food for the future. And mostly, that means just plants. It really, majority, means plants, and that the purpose of animals, in that setting, is more for their manure and for their stomping around on the soil and aerating the soil.

And frankly, I don't even think that animals need to be part of that equation. And there are a lot of examples emerging, where animals are taken out of that equation completely, and still, regeneration of the soil is happening.

But if you want it to still eat animals, if that was something you felt was critical, it would mean a vast reduction in the number of animals that we're producing because instead of having, say, a warehouse with 30,000 animals that are being produced five times a year — so that's 15 — sorry, 150,000 animals — you'd be having maybe 2000 animals, four times a year, so a vast reduction because the chickens would be wandering around and they would be pecking and they'd be moving and they'd be aerating the soil.

So we're talking about a drastic drop in that economies of scale, a drastic increase in price for that product, for those animals, which I think, that price also would drive demand way, way, way down.

Ezra Klein

I think that is a good place to end. So always our final question, what are three books you would recommend to the audience?

Leah Garcés

So my three books are “Wastelands,” by Corban Addison, which is about the Smithfield case, in North Carolina. I’d also recommend — you mentioned “Meatonomics,” which is David Robinson Simon, which does these calculations on the cost of meat, and finally, Ruth Harrison. She wrote “Animal Machines” back in 1964. And she is a real unsung hero. She influenced Peter Singer. And she was the catalyst for the five freedoms, which are the freedoms that define animal welfare in the U.K. government and then beyond. And I highly recommend that book in its modern form, because it has great, new introductions about why factory farming is still a problem, as it was in 1964.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Ezra Klein

Leah Garcés, thank you very much.

Leah Garcés

Thank you, Ezra.

Ezra Klein

“The Ezra Klein Show” is produced by Emefa Agawu, Annie Galvin, Jeff Geld and Rogé Karma. Fact checking by Michelle Harris, Rollin Hu, Mary Marge Locker, and Kate Sinclair. Original music by Isaac Jones, mixing by Jeff Geld and Sonia Herrero. Audience strategy by Shannon Busta. Special thanks to Kristin Lin and Kristina Samulewski.