

## US Factory Farm Animal Population Soars by 50 Percent in 20-Year Span

From [Zane McNeill, Truthout.org](#)

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*“This unsustainable food system ... must be reformed before it is too late,” one advocate said.*

*In addition to the Farm Bill, advocates are also urging Congress to pass [the Farm System Reform Act](#), a bill introduced over multiple legislative sessions by Sen. Cory Booker (D-New Jersey) which would place a moratorium on the construction of new factory farms. “The benefits flow to private coffers while our communities and environment are left holding the bag. Enough is enough — Congress must pass the Farm System Reform Act to ban factory farming now.”*



*Cows stand in a corral at the Jordan Dairy Farms Heifer Facility in Spencer, Massachusetts, on June 5, 2020. Adam Glanzman / For The Washington Post via Getty Images*

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New data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) [2022 Census of Agriculture](#) shows that 1.7 billion animals are currently being raised in U.S. factory farms every year – a 6 percent increase from 2016 and nearly a 50 percent increase from 20 years ago.

“The largest factory farms that are bad for farmers, the environment and public health keep growing in number,” Anne Schechinger, the Midwest director of the Environmental Working Group (EWG), [said in a statement](#). “The USDA’s new data show that without policy changes, factory farms will continue to get bigger and bigger, wreaking havoc on public health, the environment and the climate.”

The U.S. currently has [24,000 factory farms](#), or concentrated animal feeding operations, that confine large numbers of animals in small spaces. It’s difficult to comprehend the staggering quantity of animals

subjected to these inhumane conditions. The recent data from the USDA reveals that factory farms housing 500,000 or more broiler chickens churned out [nearly 1.4 billion additional chickens](#) in 2022 compared to 2012.

“America today is truly a factory farming nation. Status quo legislating in Washington is enabling a corporate feeding frenzy in rural America,” [said Amanda Starbuck](#), Food and Water Watch’s (FWW) research director. “As industrial confinements drive family-scale farmers off their land, we are left with skyrocketing numbers of animals on factory farms producing enormous amounts of waste.”

Each year, factory farms produce 940 billion pounds of manure, surpassing [more than double](#) the volume of sewage generated by the entire population of the United States. “This is 52 billion pounds more than in 2017, equivalent to creating a new city of 39 million people (or nearly two New York City metro areas) in the past five years,” FWW [said in a statement](#).

The [stress of confinement](#) in factory farms, in tandem with the sheer number of animals confined close together, causes the animals’ immune system to break down. To try to offset the number of animals who die before they are killed for human consumption, factory farms use [three-quarters](#) of the world’s antibiotics which causes antibiotic-resistant bacteria and degrades the efficiency of antibiotics in humans. The release of antibiotics into the environment through animal waste [pollutes surface and groundwater](#) and endangers public health. In fact, according to a World Animal Protection [report](#), the overutilization of antibiotics in industrialized agriculture has resulted in the premature deaths of nearly one million people annually and caused global economic losses totaling \$400 billion each year.

“We are confining more animals to produce food — much of which is exported — than ever before in history,” Delcianna J. Winders, Associate Professor of Law at Vermont Law and Graduate School told *Truthout*. “What isn’t exported is the monumental amount of waste produced by these animals — more than two times the amount generated by every person in the country.”

In 2021, the U.S. [exported 496.4 million pounds](#) of beef primarily to South Korea, Japan and Mexico. Two of the biggest pork producers in the United States, [JBS](#), which is a Brazilian multinational company, and [Smithfield Foods, Inc.](#), which is a subsidiary of the Chinese-owned conglomerate WH Group, tapped in the U.S. market with the goal of exporting U.S. meat abroad. These foreign companies have [received billions](#) in federal payments. “This unsustainable food system — which is largely the result of taxpayer subsidies to industrial animal agriculture — must be reformed before it is too late,” Winders said.

Factory farms are also to blame for exacerbating climate change. World Animal Protection estimates that factory farming alone is responsible for [12 percent of global emissions](#), resulting in the release of 6.2 billion metric tons of CO2 annually. These emissions [exceed](#) those of the entire transportation industry.

Despite the recognition that it is increasingly necessary for affluent nations to address greenhouse gas emissions from intensive agriculture to achieve their climate goals, the U.S. has continued to [leave agriculture largely unregulated](#). Unfortunately, this is a global trend. While a recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [report](#) recognizes the need for a swift transition towards a plant-based food system to avert catastrophic planetary collapse, environmental and animal advocates say the recent [COP28 climate summit](#) in Dubai [failed](#) to sufficiently address the environmental harm of factory farming.

Nevertheless, sustainable agriculture groups are continuing to advocate for a food system that prioritizes sustainability. “The good news is that Congress can move us toward a more climate-, environment-, animal-, and human-friendly food system right now through the Farm Bill,” Winders said.

The [Farm Bill](#) stands as the foremost federal legislation influencing both the production and consumption of food in the United States. The Farm Bill allocates funding for nutrition programs, commodities, crop insurance and conservation efforts. Its subsidy programs tend to favor the nation's [largest and wealthiest farms](#), primarily those specializing in [soy, wheat and corn](#) production, much of which is [used for animal feed](#). However, environmental and animal advocates, such as the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, are demanding that the next farm bill reform its commodities and conservation programs to rectify this and [increase funding](#) for its conservation stewardship and environmental quality incentives programs.

In addition to the Farm Bill, advocates are also urging Congress to pass [the Farm System Reform Act](#), a bill introduced over multiple legislative sessions by Sen. Cory Booker (D-New Jersey) which would place a moratorium on the construction of new factory farms.

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