

The Blood of Pregnant Mares Fuels Factory Farming – Literally

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[This piece has been updated to clarify that the known blood farms in the U.S. and Canada are used to source hormones other than PMSG.]



More people than ever are awakening to the grim reality of factory farming. Even if there isn't consensus on how to fix the problems of industrial meat, polling suggests [the public does at least care about animal welfare](#). Documentaries and investigations have brought greater awareness to what cows, pigs and chickens experience on factory farms. But there is another species that has been profoundly affected too, even if they don't get the same attention: horses.

While it's no secret that horses are used in the production of gelatin, there is another egregious practice that also involves these equine creatures: the extraction of a hormonal serum from pregnant mares, used by the meat industry to boost production of pork.

The livestock industry relies on this hormone to maximize pregnancy and birth. Used mostly on pig farms, but also on sheep and cattle operations, the point is to ensure as many pregnancies as possible, as quickly as possible. The hormone is usually given first to young sows to induce early puberty, which in turn triggers a kind of superovulation that results in larger litters. Just after they

give birth, sows are then given PMSG to immediately induce what's called estrus — the period of time when a female animal is in heat — so the cycle can start all over again.



Credit: Animal Welfare Foundation

Though it's difficult to track down exact numbers, the drug is omnipresent in industrial [pork production in the U.S.](#) and [Canada](#). In Germany, government records indicate that approximately [2.1 million](#) doses of this hormone are administered each year. According to the [Association for Animal Welfare](#) in Iceland, blood farmers in the country make a combined \$3.4 million USD in revenue.

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Extracting Horse Blood for Factory Farms

Since 2015, animal welfare organizations across Europe, the United States and recently Canada have partnered to conduct investigations into blood farms to find out just how many are in operation. While the largest producers of PMSG are four farms in South America (one in Argentina and three in Uruguay), there is no shortage of these farms on European land, as well as [blood farms in the U.S. and Canada](#) that source other [hormones](#).

These investigations document how pregnant mares are forced to endure [constant cycles of pregnancy and abortion](#) in order to produce the hormone for extraction. The methods used to farm

blood from mares can also be especially cruel. For instance, because [lower levels of nutrition](#) lead to higher levels of PMSG in the blood, blood farm operators have been found to feed pregnant mares very little, leaving them emaciated. Other investigations show severe restraints used on horses, while still others document horse skeletons abandoned on the farms once the operation had literally extracted the life out of them.

Horse Blood Farms Are a Global Industry

Most blood farms are located where costs are relatively inexpensive, says Sabrina Gurtner, project manager of the [Animal Welfare Foundation](#), including South America, Asia and Iceland. “Production costs are cheap [due to] the way blood farms are built,” Gurtner explains, typically out of “wooden boxes with ... wooden planks and doors.”

Blood farms in Iceland have existed for 40 years but the business has tripled over the past decade, according to research from Animal Welfare Foundation. There are 90 [farms with 4800 mares](#) used for blood in the country. Most mares are of the Icelandic breed and semi-wild. Since the horses are not used to human handling, blood farm operators often have to restrain them forcibly to prevent them from acting on their instincts by escaping or rearing up when frightened.



Distressed mares bound for blood collection in Iceland. Credit: Animal Welfare Foundation

The rapid pace at which the blood business is growing in Iceland is evident from the difference in price between foal meat (once a booming industry that is now falling), at 100 euros, and its mother’s blood, at 430 euros. Iceland’s food and veterinary authority, [MAST](#), has also been accused of bending animal welfare rules that would otherwise restrict the methods used on these farms.

When asked whether taking five liters of blood eight times in a row is safe for the mares, the Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) of MAST [said](#) that it is — based on data taken from the pharma company Isteka’s own blood measurements and veterinarians on site. When asked why there is no independent institution collecting data on the safety of mares, the officer said that studies are being planned by Keldur, a public research institution. Isteka itself relies on a 40 year old [study](#), published by Keldur in 1982 — the author of which later joined Isteka as its animal welfare officer — to justify the amount of blood drawn.

Animal Welfare Foundation and their partner [Tierschutzbund Zürich](#) (TSB) have also conducted numerous investigations, in this case into blood farms in Argentina and Uruguay, revealing mares kept in abhorrent conditions. Over 10,000 mares have been exploited for their blood between the two countries. The massive amounts of blood drawn often leaves them anemic and unable to stand. Many mares are found laying on their side, while others are found emaciated and bearing open wounds, with no veterinary care provided. Investigators also found mare skeletons left on the grounds of the farms, indicating that they were left to fend for themselves after they were no longer useful.

AWF’s follow-up investigations found an increased level of security to keep the business hidden from prying eyes, similar to Iceland where wooden crates were painted black to better disguise the blood stains.

Factory Farms Refuse Alternatives

Germany has identified 36 synthetic alternatives to PMSG that are made without animals, yet the livestock industry continues to source PMSG from blood farms. “It’s a very complicated and convoluted industry... with a lot of players...involved,” says Sonja Meadows, President and Founder of Animals’ Angels.

A growing number of pig farmers have said they are willing to try synthetics. In Germany, the biggest barrier seems to be that pig farmers are simply unaware of the way that PMSG is sourced.

One [German farmer](#) that AWF spoke with said he and other pig farmers have always trusted PMSG to do its job, but once he was shown how it is harvested, he said he would be willing to try synthetics. An association of Swiss pig farmers also [announced](#) last year that they will no longer use PMSG. Still other small farmers claim that they don’t need any hormones at all, including PMSG, because of improved welfare on their farms. “We don’t use any other methods... we have air and light, that’s all we need,” a farmer told an investigator for Animal Welfare Foundation. He says his sows experience no fertility problems, and live twice as long as those who live on industrial farms.

“These fertility problems that they say the pigs are having is just from the environment that we humans are... putting them in,” says Rósa Líf Darradóttir, medical doctor at Animal Welfare Iceland. The bottom line — dosing pigs with a hormone extracted from pregnant horses is cruel in and of itself, but it also shows just how much cruelty is a feature of the system.