

# Meaty Issues

## Bills necessary to help independent farmers



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In looking at the four bills in front of the Nebraska Legislature right now, one question stands out among all else.

What are meat packers trying to hide?

The four bills, LB832, 833, 834 and 835, are designed to curb the power of corporate livestock producers, at least the power that they have over the independent farmer who has to fend for himself.

Not surprisingly, the producers are against these bills. Why wouldn't they be? It lessens their amount of profit. And it increases the amount of responsibility toward the consumer.

Most Republicans, as they usually are, are against any regulations that might hold back big business. But in looking at the bills, there isn't much to support that these bills will destroy the comfy market that corporate producers have set up.

Let's go through it bill by bill.

LB832 forces packers to report all of its selling practices to the Department of Agriculture. This includes numbers, prices paid and where the animals were sent. They must also have a specific date for delivery of this livestock.

What's wrong with this? The Department of Agriculture serves the role of watchdog; a role that most big business proponents have always hated. Don't fight the market, they say. Allow it to foster and grow. Leave business alone; they say. Allow for the invisible hand of competition.

If that practice continues here, corruption may ensue. It usually does. Don't hold packers responsible for a specific date, delivery is delayed. This is the consumer's time. And our time is money. To be sure, the cost gets translated to the consumer in the end.

LB833 basically prevents packers from owning livestock that they intend to slaughter. It would disallow the packers from custom feeding the livestock that they slaughter, which in a sense, reduces cost for the producers.

Again, nothing wrong here. Packers simply can't feed their own livestock. They can not own and control the entire means of production. If they did, the quality of the entire product goes down, because and individual is not held accountable.

It's different with small-time producers and farmers. They are held accountable because they feel a financial and moral responsibility to produce good meat. Which would you think is more accountable, a corporate suit in a packing plant or a farmer putting food on the table?

That's what is so ironic to me — these packers, and those who support them (Republicans), preach responsibility when they're kicking the most responsible folks out of the business. Some people equate wealth to responsibility. I've been taught otherwise.

LB834 requires labeling of imported meat into the United States or produced from animals shipped into the country.

Of course, this is a big hindrance to the big business. It disallows them from buying cheap, less worthy meat abroad and passing it off as American meat here. That isn't to say that good meat isn't produced abroad. It is, but the opportunity to defraud the system still exists.

Finally, LB835 prohibits price discrimination based on quantity. This is a big one. Packers can't simply flood the market with a bunch of meat, good or bad, and have it get sold because it's cheaper at a higher quantity. That's not what the blessed market should be about.

It ought to be about giving the best quality product for the lowest cost. Packers can't pro-

vide that. Small-time producers can. Why? Because it's their livelihood. And I'll bet on someone like that over the corporation every time.

So what does the corporation have to hide? In a word, money. Money's the key here, the driving force behind resistance to any bill that levels the playing field. Sure, you'll hear producers and packers bemoan their situation, saying that they're suffering through the hard times of low prices, too. But then again, the ability to survive those prices ought to be what it all about, right? If the farmers can't make it, forget them.

Wrong. These farmers represent the conscience of Nebraska, the conscience of America. They work every day, for themselves. They produce a good product. They're like most other Americans, trying to do their job the best way they can because they have to.

And the market shouldn't rid itself of these people. We need independent competition. Without it, one corporation would just buy another until eventually, there was one livestock producer. One. See that's how



SHAWN DRAPAL/DN

the market works if you don't touch it. Social Darwinism. Survival of the fittest. But, in the end, only corporations would be fit enough for victory.

Our economy isn't about that. Never has been. We've never wanted to create a real-world "Metropolis," where one man owned everything. The producer situation is no different.

And don't tell me we're delaying the inevitable with these bills. That, eventually, farmers will vanish no matter what. That is a fallacy, because there is no substitute the independent businessman or businesswoman. They continue to be the lifeblood of our economy; without them we'd have no corporations to speak of.

These bills represent a step in the right direction for Nebraska. A smart step. The kind of step that understands that by allowing the packers to take over means a devalued product. A step that understands that turning our back on those who made this state what it is would be wrong.

A step that redeems our spirit of agriculture as opposed to corporate greed.

Maybe, best of all, the bills might force big corporations to develop a conscience of their own. It reiterates that the bottom line isn't the only line. It reaffirms that, in the end, we are the market, not some name with liquid assets. Not only should we fight it, but realize that we have the power to do so. LB 832-835 gives us that power.

## Farmers fighting losing inevitable battle



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I'd like you to meet Daryl Mitchell.

He's been raising hogs near Hickman for more than 30 years. Every day he puts on his worn denim jeans and old jacket to feed his pigs and do his chores. His soft voice and humble attitude contrast his tall frame and rugged demeanor. He's a farmer through and through — a family farmer.

He and other hometown farmers from across the state recently traveled to Lincoln to

### Don't fight the market

Bottom line, the farmers know that the corporations are punishing them in the marketplace. Most wouldn't even argue that the small operations can produce more hogs. But they will say that factory farms are winning in the market is because of unfair advantages.

"A Time To Act," a USDA report card on the status of small farms admits that "the farm share of the retail price for pork declined from 30 percent in November 1997 to 12 percent in November 1998," while the retailers make huge profits, because "packers offered sweetheart contracts to mega-producers," and "smaller producers were left to perish in cash markets." It also claims the government isn't enforcing the Packers and Stockyards Act, which set out to curb unfair marketing practices.

But are these even unfair? When it comes down to it, the mega-producers get better deals because they can produce more quantity for the packers than the small-time farmers can.

Trying to stop the corporations because they can produce more is just like trying to stop Wal-Mart from coming into a small town.

If someone can produce a product with equal quality at a cheaper price, then let them. We cannot fight the market. Every time we try to get involved with it, we screw it up.

Minimum wage, price controls, trade restrictions and competition regulations all do the same thing — inhibit the market from working its magic. We may not be able to fully understand the market, but we know enough that it's going to do what it wants in the end, no matter what we do.

So this trip to the capital is just the latest scheme by the small farmers to bolster their own financial situations and try to fight the market. One bill would require country-of-origin labeling for meat (inhibiting world trade and comparative advantage), another would prevent packers from custom feeding livestock (trying to stop them from growing their own), and then another would stop packers from offering better prices for quantity (fundamentally contradicting capitalism).

You can't blame the farmers from trying to save their jobs and their way of life, but in the end, all of the government regulation is going to catch up with them.

### Take this job and ...

Now this is the part that is really going to hurt a lot of farmers: If you can't make money at what you're doing, then get a new job. I realize it sounds a lot easier on paper, and that some of these farms have been in the family for hundreds of years, but you can't keep asking government to bail you out when you lose money to the big farms.

Just look at the farm subsidy payments from the feds. Each year, Daddy Government gives farmers two checks, one in the winter, and an equal payment in September. But 69.3 percent of the federal subsidy money has already been cashed by Nebraska farmers. They're hoping to take next season's funds to try to save this year's horrible farm year. The farmers can't get by on their own and they need help. But instead of running for federal assistance, the market may need some thinning.

Daryl Mitchell said it himself: "We have too much supply, maybe not enough demand."

And if the average family farmer can admit to an oversupply, then the average family farmer should understand a new field of employment may need to be on the horizon.

The family farm has given America integrity, strength, hard work and stability. But today the family farm is on its way out, and if corporate farms are destined to take over, they will, one way or the other.

I'm sure a lot of you probably come from farm families or know people who live on the farm, and you're frustrated with the decline of the entire institution. But if you really want to save the family farm, then save them one by one, privately, with the help of the market.

And Daryl Mitchell puts the future in perfect perspective: "I don't know if the government can help us — it's all up to the farmer himself."

attend the Legislature's Agricultural Committee meeting. They came to talk about the plight of the family farm, due to the increase in corporate, factory farms.

"People don't want to go broke and the family farm is in jeopardy," Mitchell said.

So he and other farm activists packed into a crowded hearing room at the capital to talk about ways to save the good ol' Nebraska family farm. They wanted to figure out how to bring down the large farms. In other words, they want government to step in and save a type of farm that is much less efficient than another.

### Large and in charge

The fact is, large operations can produce quality hogs cheaper and more efficiently than most family farm operations.

Of course, small farm activists groups like the Center For Rural Affairs disputed findings in support of that statement and mounted an opposition saying, "We see too many government officials and too many farm organizations blindly putting too much faith into scientific research that deserves more critical analysis."

So the numbers need more crunching in order to abolish the family farms. But even without specific findings from analysis of swine confinement, does it really take a genius to see that large operations can do it better?

If the small farms were so much more efficient and beneficial to the economy, would they be fighting so hard to stay alive? I don't think so. Any intelligent human being can easily observe the prowess of the factory farms.