

Safe food comes from a safe workplace: Release of “Fast Food Nation” movie this week puts meatpacking work conditions back in public eye

The release of the movie *Fast Food Nation* this month again puts meatpacking, Nebraska’s leading industry, in the public eye. The movie tells the story of how billions of burgers go from the ranch to the fast food consumer – which is to say, to each and every one of us. Those burgers, of course, don’t just materialize out of thin air, neatly packaged with a side of fries. There are a lot of stories behind that burger, including how it comes from the sweat and tears of thousands of low-paid, mostly immigrant Latino workers in towns and cities across Nebraska and other major meatpacking states.

This story includes how these workers, seeking the American dream like generations before them, are forced to put up with the most dangerous industrial workplace in the country. While not as graphically brutal one hundred years after Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, the meatpacking industry continues to be cold, dangerous, low-paid, and dependent upon immigrant labor. Take a walk through a modern beef slaughterhouse, and amidst the noise, the blood, the swinging carcasses relentlessly passing by on speeding chains, you will see a manufacturing marvel. These meat factories use thousands of white-clad workers to push through over 400 head of cattle per hour, one every ten seconds, through a “disassembly” line, spitting out not just hamburger but steaks, ribs, and roasts out the other end. But the industry, with its sharp knives and slippery floors, has an injury rate more than double that of all U.S. manufacturing plants. The Government Accountability Office cautions that injuries still appear to be underreported, due to fear of retaliation and job loss. Meanwhile, federal oversight of health and safety in meatpacking plants continues to erode.

Unfortunately, this dangerous workplace also puts the safety of our hamburgers at risk. The simple truth is that it all happens too fast. The incredible line speed not only causes thousands of injuries through its tremendous repetition, the ever present knives, and the slippery surfaces. It also makes it more likely the good meat gets mixed up with the bad. The *Fast Food Nation* movie features this story line, as a fast food chain seeks to identify the source of an e-coli breakout, a food safety problem happening far too often. Sadly, despite new food safety regulations and procedures, the meatpacking plant continues to be a regular source of unsafe food. And despite some good-faith efforts by packing companies to improve safety, they are still not meeting community expectations. Europeans, Australians, and New Zealanders get safer meat, and have safer workplaces, because they have plants moving one-third as fast as ours. Rather than insisting upon speed, these competitors insist upon safety, both for their workers and the food heading to their fast food counters.

Our love affair with the fast food burger must include an understanding and appreciation of where it came from. But what can we consumers do? Insisting on a slower line speed in the slaughterhouses is a good place to start. Meatpacking must slow down. Slowing the line in the packing house will mean fewer injuries. Slowing the line will mean that fewer consumers will get sick or die from e coli poisoning. And slowing the line will mean fewer mass recalls of meat and a more economically healthy industry.

Mike Johanns, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, has it within his power to require the industry to slow down. And Secretary Johanns already has a track record of action on behalf of meatpacking workers and food safety, from his days as Governor of Nebraska. Johanns led the creation of a unique state-level policy, the “Nebraska Meatpacking Industry Workers Bill of Rights,” to help protect meatpacking workers and monitor the industry. This move resulted from widespread alarm over the working conditions in a large local beef slaughterhouse, documented by the *Lincoln Journal Star*. An evaluation of the bill of rights initiative is being released this week by Nebraska Appleseed (“Dignity on the Line”), and confirms that state-level reform can help meatpacking workers seek better conditions.

But an individual state can only do so much. The federal government, through the USDA, is in charge of food safety, and regulates each and every meatpacking plant in the country. It is Secretary Johanns’ job to ensure our hamburgers – and the workers who process them – are as safe as they can be. Slowing down the line is a great place to start.

The book *The Jungle* came out a century ago, and as the author Upton Sinclair said “aimed for our hearts but hit our stomach.” With the release of the movie *Fast Food Nation*, fast food consumers today are in the same place. We can all see safe food comes from safe meatpacking plants, and we can all do something about it. Starting this week, postcards demanding that USDA Secretary Johanns do his job and act to slow down the line – just as he acted in Nebraska when he learned of the alarming conditions – are being filled out and sent in from across the Midwest. The postcards are available both at www.NeAppleseed.org, and at www.participate.net (the website of the production company for *Fast Food Nation*).

As a fast food consumer, you can help assure you have a safe hamburger by helping to slow down the line. Let Secretary Johanns know now is a great time to act.

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