

12 October 2006

Chicago City Council  
City Hall  
121 N. LaSalle St. - Rm. 107  
Chicago, IL 60602

Dear Chicago City Council members:

I write today regarding the issue of foie gras and the humane treatment of animals. For the past 32 years, I have served as a doctor of veterinary medicine, specializing in the care of farm animals. I am the immediate past President of the New York State Veterinary Medical Society. I have long been active in animal welfare causes and was the first recipient of the American Veterinary Medical Association's Animal Welfare Award.

In the course of my career, I have had many opportunities to observe first hand the practices of Hudson Valley Foie Gras, America's largest foie gras farm. I first visited Hudson Valley Foie Gras nearly 20 years ago to investigate their animal welfare practices as an active member of the Sullivan County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In the years since, I have visited the farm with many animal welfare and veterinary medical groups. Earlier this year, I accompanied a group of veterinarians from the American Veterinary Medical Association as they inspected the farm in order to advise the AVMA on animal welfare issues as they relate to foie gras. On all of these visits to Hudson Valley Foie Gras, we have had full access to observe all of the farms operations.

Based on my years of experience caring for animals and my many experiences observing foie gras farming first hand, it is my professional opinion that foie gras production as practiced at Hudson Valley Foie Gras is humane and in the mainstream of American animal agriculture. I have no reason to believe that the situation at either of the two other foie gras farms in the United States is any different. Put simply, the ducks are not abused.

Videos and still photographs showing the ducks in distress do not accurately represent the farming practices that I have seen first hand. I understand that opponents of foie gras shared videos and photographs at a hearing of the City Council's Health Committee last year. I have seen these same or similar videos and photographs that anti-foie groups have displayed on various websites. The conditions displayed in the videos and photographs are not an accurate depiction of modern foie gras farming. These videos and photos presented by activists take the rare exceptions and present them as the rule.

The fact that some small percentage of animals on farms gets sick is not reason for condemnation. The sad truth is that animals do get sick. As a veterinarian, I make my living caring for animals kept as pets and animals used for agricultural purposes. If a

farm has thousands of animals, as foie gras farms do, there will unquestionably be animals that develop health problems. While this fact is unfortunate, the exact same propensity for illness holds true for animals kept as pets and animals in the wild.

I am very sympathetic to those who care about animal welfare, but many of the claims of animal welfare activists display a profound misunderstanding of the animals they purport to protect. For example, those opposed to foie gras often point to the incidence of bumblefoot, a foot problem that does affect some ducks, as evidence that foie gras farming is inhumane. In fact, however, bumblefoot occurs with birds in the wild and with birds raised on farms that do not produce foie gras. In fact, this year I have had to treat two cases of bumblefoot in ducks kept on a farm essentially as pets and with free access to ponds for swimming. To blame bumblefoot on foie gras farmers is to misrepresent the facts.

Ultimately, it is essential that a rational discussion of animal welfare begin with a clear understanding that animals have physical characteristics very distinct from humans, and each species is different. Indeed, that is the reason veterinarians exist. If it were otherwise, we would take our pets and farm animals to our pediatricians and general practitioners. Much has been made, for example, of the argument that we should not feed ducks through a tube because we, as humans, would not like to be fed through a tube. Such arguments, I fear, display a deep misunderstanding of the physiological differences between humans and ducks.

As someone who grew up on a farm with livestock and works with farm animals each and every day, I can assure you that there is no group of people who care more about animal welfare than farmers. For them, animal welfare is not an abstract moral issue. It is a necessity for economic survival. The better animals are treated, the better the final agricultural product. Foie gras farmers are no different.

I am committed to the cause of animal welfare and commend the Chicago City Council for its concern for the well being of animals. I do believe, however, that the singling out foie gras as being inhumane or outside the mainstream of American animal agriculture is simply not supported by the facts.

I thank you for your consideration of these views.

Sincerely,

Dr. Lawrence W. Bartholf, DVM