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FUTURE PERFECT

Would this food label change how you eat?

Switzerland's new experiment will treat meat-packaging like cigarette warnings.

by **Kenny Torrella**

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Paige Vickers/Vox; Getty Images



Kenny Torrella is a senior reporter for Vox's Future Perfect section, with a focus on animal welfare and the future of meat.

Imagine, for a moment, that you're seated and ready to dine at one of Switzerland's many celebrated high-end eateries, where a prix fixe meal can run around \$400. On the menu, the slow-cooked Schweinsfilet, or pork tenderloin, comes with a bizarre and disturbing disclosure: The pigs raised to make that meal were castrated without pain relief.

Would it change what you order? That's a decision Switzerland's 8.8 million residents and millions of annual tourists will soon face.

Effective last week — with a two-year phase-in — a new Swiss law requires food companies, grocers, and restaurants selling animal products in the country to disclose whether they came from animals that were mutilated without anesthetic. That'll include mutilation procedures like castration in pigs and cattle, dehorning in cows, beak searing in hens, and even leg severing in frogs.

This story was first featured in the Processing Meat newsletter

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The law will also require disclosures explaining that foie gras is made by force-feeding ducks and geese.

Horrific as these procedures are, especially when performed without pain relief, they're standard practice in global meat, milk, and egg production.

Male piglets, for example, are castrated to prevent their meat from giving off a fecal odor and taste — what the industry calls “boar taint.” Piglets' teeth are clipped to prevent injuries to littermates or their mom's teats while nursing, but it can also cause painful dental issues and infections. Egg producers cut off part of hens' beaks because when they're tightly packed into factory farms, they tend to peck at each other, which can lead to injury and death. To make cattle easier for humans to handle, ranchers dehorn calves by sticking them with a hot iron or applying a caustic chemical.



A piglet being castrated at factory farm in Poland. The procedure is done without anesthesia, so one worker holds down the struggling, squealing piglet while the other makes an incision on the scrotum and pulls out the testes. Andrew Skowron/We Animals



A calf with blood running down their face stands inside an individual enclosure on a farm in Czechia. This young calf has recently undergone a painful dehorning procedure. Lukas Vincour/Zvířata Nežijí/We Animals

Meat production is a high-volume business, with tens of billions of mammals and birds — and over 1 trillion fish — churned through the system each year.

Administering pain relief to the animals subjected to these painful procedures would be the least meat companies could do, but most don't because it would cost them a little extra time and money.

And even when performed with pain relief, such procedures remain cruel — removing animals' tails, horns, and testicles, or shortening their beaks and teeth, reduces their ability to communicate or perform basic biological functions.

Switzerland is one of a handful of countries where farmers are required to give animals pain relief before these painful procedures. But the small country still imports plenty of meat and other animal products from abroad. Swiss animal advocates have long advocated for banning imported products that come from animals mutilated without pain relief, but Swiss policymakers have rejected that idea and instead settled on increased transparency in labeling as a compromise.

It's an unusual law, and although it falls short of what animal advocates want, it's refreshing to see a country take this step toward transparency.

Switzerland's disclosure requirement pierces the veil of the shrink-wrapped slab of meat consumers see in the grocery store or prepared in dishes at restaurants, suggesting that meat is simply an inanimate product rather than the flesh of a once-living, feeling creature who suffered. A mere disclosure provides no respite from that suffering, but it's something. Because in the US and around the world, meat, milk, and egg companies go to great lengths to conceal the horrors of animal agriculture from the public.

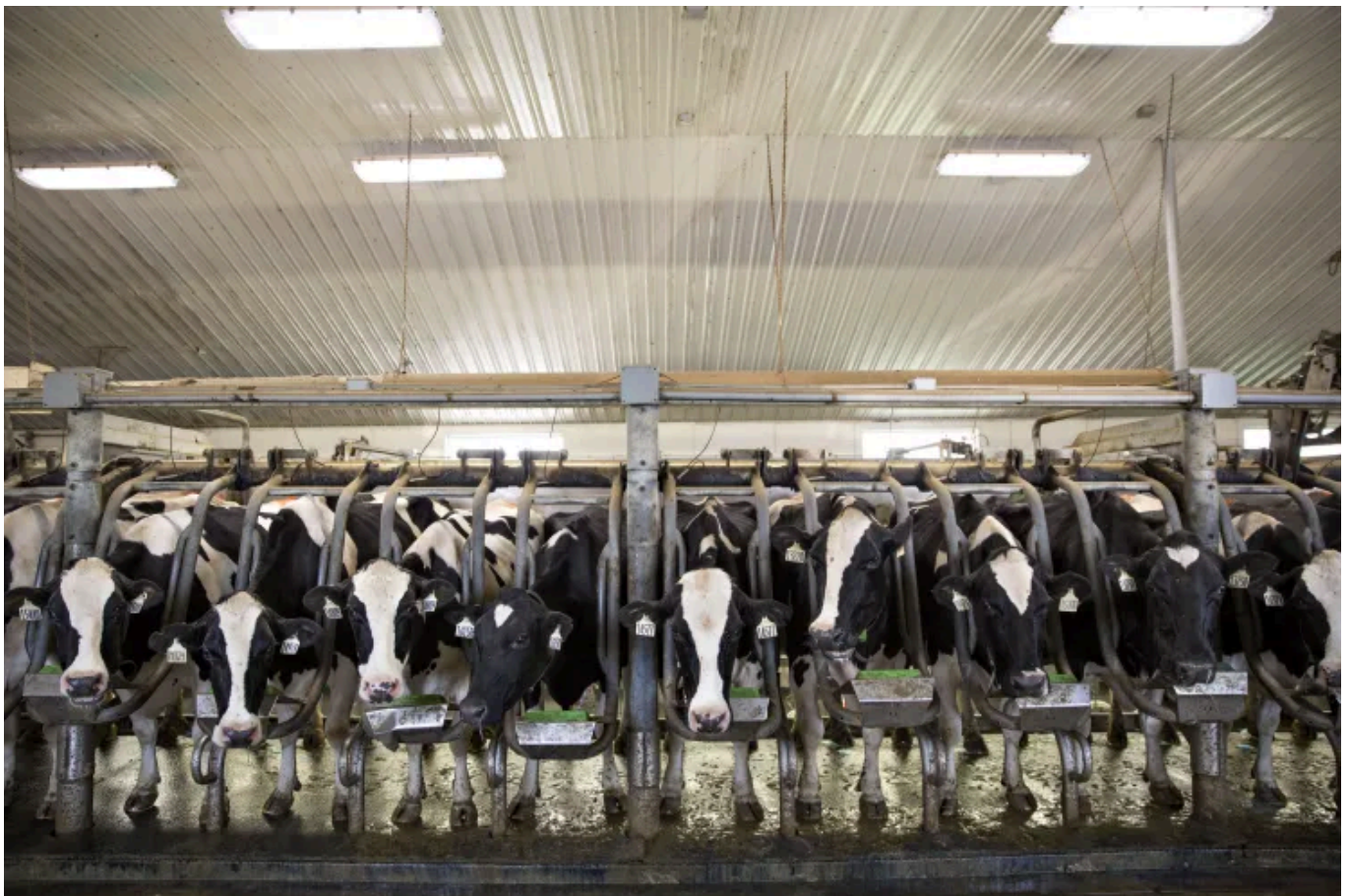
By requiring food companies and restaurants to slap what amounts to a warning label on their products, Switzerland is effectively treating meat produced with particularly cruel yet common practices as a vice — much like many countries do with tobacco products. Whether or not these labels steer consumers away from meat or push meat producers to change their practices might hold important lessons in what works to reduce animal suffering.

The double bind of the meat industry's concealment and consumers' willful ignorance

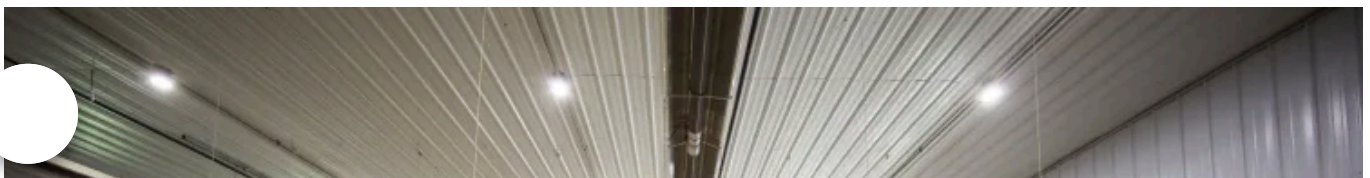
Mutilation without pain relief is, of course, just one of a litany of welfare issues that farmed animals suffer from birth to death. Animals raised for food are often overcrowded, forced to live in their own waste, exposed to disease, confined in cages, violently and artificially inseminated, roughly handled, inhumanely transported, and bred to grow bigger and faster, causing health and welfare issues. Problems at slaughterhouses abound, too.

“Significantly more products and production methods should be subject” to Switzerland’s new labeling regulations, Vanessa Gerritsen, a lawyer for the Swiss animal advocacy organization Tier im Recht, told me in an email.

The vast majority of the world’s farmed animals are raised on factory farms with standard practices that would be illegal animal cruelty in many countries if done to a dog or cat. Yet most consumers — at least in the US — believe they don’t buy animal products from factory farms.



Cows stand in the milking parlor at the Lake Breeze Dairy farm in Malone, Wisconsin. Daniel Acker/Bloomberg via Getty Images





Turkeys in a Michigan factory farm. Rudy Malmquist

Some of that disconnect can be attributed to industry deceit. Meat industry trade groups in the US and abroad have successfully lobbied for laws that make it a crime for activists to document animal cruelty on farms. And in the US, meat companies are allowed to claim just about whatever they want on their labels and in advertising. That's led to extensive "humanewashing" in which brands mislead consumers into believing their animals are treated decently.

But there's also the problem of willful ignorance: Some research has found that consumers prefer to avoid information about meat production.

Switzerland's new regulation represents a massive experiment in pushing back against this inclination, forcing people to think about the cruelty that goes into their pork chops and egg omelettes at a particularly important time: the moment they're deciding what to eat at a restaurant or buy at a grocery store.

But will it be enough to actually change what people eat? "Hard to say," Alice Di Concetto, founder and executive director of the European Institute for Animal Law & Policy, told me in an email. "Studies tend to show that consumers base their purchasing choices almost exclusively on price." But it could have an impact on the decisions of restaurants and grocery stores, she said, "who might be reluctant to offer these products, anticipating that they won't sell well as a result of carrying a negative claim on them."

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Switzerland implemented a similar law in 2000, requiring disclosure labels on imported eggs from producers that cage their hens (it was already illegal to cage egg-laying hens in Switzerland). After that law, Gerritsen told me, imports significantly declined.

Di Concetto also pointed to a [labeling law](#) in the European Union, which requires that egg cartons on grocery store shelves include a code that corresponds to a specific production method, such as caged, indoor, outdoor, or organic. Di Concetto credits these egg-labeling requirements for helping initiate the EU egg industry’s transition to cage-free production. But, she said, “it’s not so much that consumers wouldn’t buy caged eggs. It’s mostly due to manufacturers not liking the idea of selling products that indicated something so detrimental.”

The new Swiss law, though, will require disclosures far more direct and visceral, and harder for the public to ignore.

At bare minimum, for consumers to make more humane choices — whether that means eating less meat or buying from farms that avoid some of the cruelest factory farm practices — they at least need to be informed. Right now, meat, milk, and egg labels tell consumers little about animal treatment or actively lie to them.

Switzerland’s experiment will soon show us what happens when that’s forced to change, if only a little.

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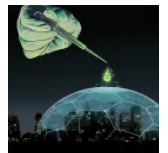
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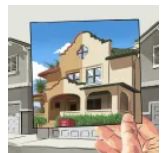


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