

Comments on Bill C-205

Members of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food,

As a veterinarian and someone who cares about the well-being of animals, including animals raised in the agri-food industry, I am worried about the sometimes rapidly expanding use of gag laws to silence whistleblowers who expose animal abuse in the agri-food industry. These laws are commonly referred to as “ag-gag laws.”

I am further concerned that these laws could spread throughout Canada after being introduced in two provinces: Alberta and, most recently, Ontario. These laws first appeared in the United States, but they were abolished in many American states after being found unconstitutional.

Ag-gag laws criminalize acts including undercover investigations by animal rights advocates, journalists, etc., who get themselves hired at farms so they can film instances of animal abuse while still complying with the employer’s biosecurity measures. Animal abuse is a staple of the agri-food industry and is not always the result of an intent to do harm (Kona-Boun, Jean-Jacques (2020) Anthropogenic suffering of farmed animals: the other side of zoonoses. *Animal Sentience* 30(20), <https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/animsent/vol5/iss30/20/>). Most of the time, the abuse and subsequent suffering is the result of either following the standard practices in the industry—in Canada, these practices are listed in the National Farm Animal Care Council’s codes of practice for the care and handling of farm animals—or disregarding these standard practices, as I observed countless times on different kinds of Canadian farms over the past few months. Many scandals have come to light in the last few years and again very recently, in Canada and elsewhere, that revealed this animal abuse to governments and the public. These scandals sometimes led to investigations and measures to address this abuse, which would have otherwise been unnoticed—all thanks to whistleblowers. In some cases, official government inspections of the same farms failed to uncover the abuse that whistleblowers did. This shows how inspection authorities are too permissive or even accepting of abuse.

Ag-gag laws are not designed to stop animal abuse but rather to hide it even better behind the sealed doors of the agri-food industry. The disproportionate and unreasonable penalties along with the recent inclusion of non-individuals such as animal rights organizations on the list of offenders only further confirms the industry’s fear of being caught and its desire for censorship and secrecy. Rather than pouring so much energy, time and resources into criminalizing whistleblowing under the pretense of biosecurity risks, we should be focusing on improving transparency in the agri-food industry, which is self-regulated and exerts a great deal of influence on government authorities. Ways to increase transparency include stricter regulations on advertising and labelling to reflect the realities of the lives and deaths of farmed animals. In addition, audiovisual surveillance equipment could be installed in all areas where animals are handled, from birth until death, including during shipping. This monitoring work would be regulated by an entity completely independent from the agri-food industry and the government department that defends its financial interests. The data gathered from the surveillance should be accessible to all members of the public who are interested in the treatment of farmed animals.

Promoting secrecy does not protect animals or consumers; it only helps the agri-food industry's economic interests. It erodes public confidence in the industry and infringes on basic rights of free expression and access to information. Greater secrecy also prevents the use of this information to advocate for animal well-being (something people are becoming increasingly concerned about) and to protect the food chain more generally, including from blatant non-compliance with biosecurity regulations, as I witnessed in Canada in the last few months.

I sincerely hope the members of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food will take these comments into account for their work on Bill C-205, in the interest of farmed animals and the general public.

Respectfully,

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