



***A Local Voice at  
the National Table***

## **Meat Farmers Are Getting Butchered**

September 2011

"Buy 1, Get 2 FREE," shouted this week's flyer from the Big Y World Class Market, a Massachusetts-owned grocery store chain. One-pound packages of ground beef are on sale, as are whole chickens, boneless rump roasts and pork tenderloin. Buy one, get two free is a good deal, and many shoppers will fill their carts with ground beef and other meat products. But you have to wonder if the farmer is making any money on this.

Beef cattle, hogs, chickens and turkeys are raised on farms throughout the United States, but they are processed by fewer and fewer meatpackers. Currently, the top four beef packers control more than 81 percent of the sales of cattle for slaughter in the U.S., and the top four swine processors control about 65 percent of hog sales. Perdue and Tyson control our country's poultry market. These levels of concentration give the packers a huge advantage, and they use their leverage to force farmers to accept unfavorable terms. This reduces farmers' profit margins and ultimately drives them out of business. More than one million family-owned beef and hog farms have gone out of business since 1980 due to abusive practices by processors. But these practices are also bringing Big Y shoppers the advantage of low prices for meat and poultry products.

So why rock the boat when meat is reasonably priced at the supermarket? Because we are losing small, family farms at an alarming rate, and our food supply is being concentrated in a few corporate hands.

In June 2010, the U.S. Department of Agriculture clarified the law that governs the relationship between livestock producers and meatpackers/processors. This proposed change, known as the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA) rule, would improve bargaining rights for individual producers and restore competition to agricultural markets. Predictably, it prompted an immediate and vigorous backlash from meat processors.

That's because the rule protects farmers from retaliation when they speak out against unfair business practices. The rule also prevents packers and processors from driving farmers and ranchers out of business one farm at a time. Poultry companies will no longer be allowed to force growers to make expensive equipment changes without compensation. Livestock markets will be more competitive because two or more packers will be prohibited from sharing a single livestock buyer. Hog farmers who are currently kept in the dark about each others' contracting agreements could compare their contracts and other vital documents to make sure they are being treated fairly.

The USDA released this rule 16 months ago. It is past time to implement it. Call the White House comment line at [202-456-1111](tel:202-456-1111) and say that you stand for the protection of America's livestock and poultry farmers. They are producing the meat that Big Y is selling this week. They are being driven out of business in the process. Give them a break and let them know you want the GIPSA rule implemented

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without delay. Your action is as important to farmers as "Buy 1, Get 2 FREE" is for your family's pocketbook.

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