



Lessons Learned for Animal Protection during the COVID-19 Pandemic:

The ASPCA's Recommendations for Addressing Impacts on Animals through Federal Policy

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged every part of society and tested the strength of our nation's existing systems and policies, including those meant to protect animals. Like so many other organizations, animal shelters and rescues across the country adapted to social distancing directives, staff shortages, and lost revenue from the inability to host in-person fundraising events and programming. Simultaneously, pet owners coped with unprecedented financial and resource challenges.

The ASPCA and the greater animal welfare community have risen to this challenge by finding new ways to directly support animals and pet owners. As Americans enter the second year of the COVID-19 crisis, the ASPCA continues to learn about and address the challenges that the pandemic presents for pet owners and animal welfare organizations across the country.

In this report, we offer a set of recommendations to address the unintended consequences to animals caused by the pandemic—and broader, systemic failures to appropriately protect animals—and to strengthen our federal animal protection policies going forward. Our goal is to prevent and mitigate animal suffering now and during future pandemics or other national emergencies.





The ASPCA's Response and the Larger Issues Exposed

As a 155-year-old organization, the ASPCA is no stranger to navigating the challenges of natural disasters, world wars, and pandemics. From the outset of this pandemic's emergence in March 2020, we moved swiftly to respond to its impacts on people and their pets through a series of emergency initiatives: [Directly assisting pet owners](#) struggling with financial instability, disseminating [information](#) about animals and COVID-19, and supporting more than 80 animal welfare organizations through more than \$5 million in emergency relief grants. We directly aided pet owners via [pet food distribution centers](#) and the [NYC COVID-19 Pet Hotline](#). We [adapted our animal care protocols](#) and shared our recommendations with the animal sheltering community. (For example, in April 2020, we issued a statement in support of [veterinary telemedicine](#) during the pandemic.)

In addition to presenting novel challenges for the animal welfare community, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed gaps in our safety net systems to protect animals. As stay-at-home orders went into effect around the country, we [urged elected officials](#) to ensure that animal sheltering services, animal care and veterinary services were deemed essential functions, so that animal-care needs were not overlooked. In December 2020, the ASPCA [released new data](#) showing that at that time, more than 19.2 million pets in the U.S. lived in households with past-due rent or mortgage payments. Housing insecurity puts animals and their families at risk of being separated due to a lack of affordable pet-inclusive housing options.

The pandemic also revealed—more starkly than ever—that the industrial animal agriculture model causes billions of animals to suffer in inadequate living conditions on farms and in unsafe slaughter facilities. Additionally, commercial dog breeders, zoos, and laboratories that test on animals were caught flat-footed without emergency care plans, and had to improvise, sometimes with inhumane consequences.

Companion Animals

The pandemic has had some positive outcomes for animals. Many pets and their families have benefited from the mutual emotional support of home-based school and work setups. As a result, more people are recognizing and embracing the important bond with animals, which can sustain us in difficult times.

During the first year of the pandemic, the ASPCA saw a 62% increase in animals going into foster homes through our New York City foster program alone, and many shelters across the country have reported a spike in people fostering and adopting animals. The ASPCA launched a successful equine fostering and adoption campaign in [April 2020](#), helping to move more horses out of shelters. Equine rescue organizations that partner with the ASPCA through [The Right Horse Initiative](#) continued to match the horses in their care with foster and adoptive families, working to place [20% more equines in 2020](#) compared to the same period in 2019. We are heartened that so many people have been opening their homes to animals and finding comfort in their companionship during these challenging times.

Meanwhile, animal shelters and rescue organizations have continued to assist communities through free or low-cost veterinary care and other services, enabling pet owners to keep their animals during this turbulent time. Shelters have also continued to care for and help rehome animals amidst severe resource challenges. Although current national trends do not yet show an increase in owner surrenders or stray intakes related to the pandemic, there's always a risk that pet owners will not be able to provide adequate care for their pets during any disaster situation. With that in mind, it's important for people, shelters, and communities to prepare for any consequences this on-going crisis may have on animal welfare.

Due to the resource challenges that the animal welfare community has endured and uncertainty about the community's needs moving forward, we echo the call of [83 members of Congress](#) urging the inclusion of support for animal welfare organizations in future COVID relief legislation.



Keep pets and people together

Nationally, there was already a severe shortage of affordable housing options for low-income families before COVID-19 hit the U.S., and pet-inclusive affordable housing is even more scarce. The pandemic exposed the cracks in the affordable housing continuum and highlighted the importance of stable housing. The combination of housing insecurity and the lack of affordable, pet-inclusive housing options puts pets and their families at risk of separation.



To prevent the dislocation of families and separation of families from their pets, we strongly recommend an extension of the current federal moratorium on evictions until the end of the pandemic, joining the call of [thousands of groups](#). We are grateful that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently extended the temporary moratorium on evictions through June 30, 2021, and pledged to improve enforcement of the moratorium's protections. This extension and enforcement of the moratorium will help keep millions of renters stably housed during the pandemic, including families with pets.

To ensure that families and pets can stay together, we recommend the widespread adoption of pet-inclusive housing policies, including in federally subsidized housing and homeless shelters. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has already made extensive efforts to create pet-inclusive housing for the residents of its public, senior, and disabled-persons housing communities. We urge HUD to consider requiring Public Housing Authorities (PHA) that have been granted an exemption from the pet-inclusive requirement to reconsider those policies—especially for the duration of the pandemic—and to extend pet-inclusive housing regulations to cover properties participating in the project-based rental assistance program. We also urge government assistance to help homeless shelters retrofit their facilities and provide more amenities that can accommodate residents and their pets, which will remove a significant barrier for people experiencing chronic homelessness.

Disaster planning at puppy mills, zoos, and labs

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of planning for a crisis, whether a natural disaster, a pandemic, or other emergency. When stay-at-home orders first went into effect, animal-based enterprises and pet owners alike had to implement, or in too many cases, create, plans to care for their animals. Those who already had a plan in place found the adjustment much easier than the many animal facilities that were unprepared to continue to care for animals as they scaled back operations and improvised social-distancing protocols for animal-care workers. Tragically, the lack of preparation led to the deaths of [many animals in research laboratories](#) at the Oregon Health & Science University, Carnegie Mellon University, Harvard University, and others.



Currently, facilities licensed under the Animal Welfare Act (AWA)—commercial dog breeding facilities, zoos, and animal laboratories—are not required under federal law to have emergency contingency plans in place. This is why Congress must act now pass the Providing Responsible Emergency Plans for Animals at Risk of Emerging Disasters (PREPARED) Act (H.R. 1442), bipartisan legislation introduced by Representatives Dina Titus (D-NV) and Rodney Davis (R-IL). This legislation would require AWA-regulated facilities to create and implement contingency plans for protecting animals in their care and to ensure that employees are trained in emergency procedures in order to prevent unnecessary suffering and loss from predictable events.

In December 2020, Congress directed the USDA to, within 90 days, move forward with a public notice and comment process for reinstating the emergency contingency planning rule, after years of delay. We urge the USDA to immediately comply.

Ensure continued oversight of puppy mills, zoos, and labs

The USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) announced at the beginning of the pandemic outbreak that it would stop conducting routine Animal Welfare Act (AWA) compliance inspections at zoos, breeding facilities, and animal laboratories. As a result, APHIS has not conducted regular, in-person inspections of commercial animal facilities since March 2020. Although the agency eventually started conducting virtual inspections, it has failed to provide timely detailed information on how these virtual inspections work as a substitution for in-person inspections to ensure a reliable assessment of compliance with the law.

Despite the cessation of in-person inspections, the agency [continued to issue licenses](#) called “variances” to new applicants, including those the agency had never inspected. What’s more, the agency allowed thousands of animal businesses to stay licensed, even though the agency did not confirm these businesses met the criteria for relicensing. As of the release of this report, the list of “active” AWA licensees includes thousands of facilities with [expired licenses](#). These very significant lapses and gaps in oversight must be closed to ensure that animals under this regulatory system are not suffering.

We urge the USDA to provide to the relevant congressional committees an accounting of its Animal Care division’s use of funds provided through COVID-19 relief legislation to enforce the AWA, and to identify the total number of virtual inspections conducted and the facilities that received licenses or temporary license variances. We also urge Congress to actively address longstanding problems with the agency’s AWA inspection and enforcement program.

Farm Animals and Our Food System

The pandemic has pulled back the curtain on the inherent cruelty and fragility of our factory farming system. Slaughterhouses—which are already notoriously cruel for animals and dangerous for people—rapidly became COVID-19 hotspots when meatpacking companies failed to provide their workers with Personal Protective Equipment or implement and enforce social distancing protocols. Instead of encouraging the implementation of safer working environments in slaughterhouses amidst these COVID outbreaks, the USDA allowed record numbers of plants to operate at [extreme speeds](#), putting animals at a heightened risk of inhumane slaughter and increasing infection risk for workers.

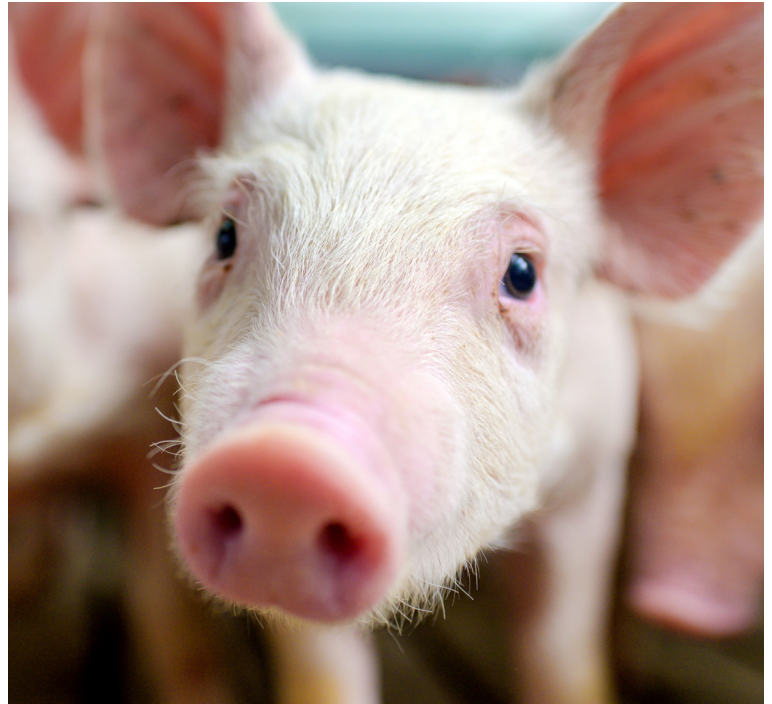


When some slaughterhouses inevitably slowed production and closed due to uncontrolled COVID outbreaks, the precarious “just in time” model for raising animals on industrial farms broke down.

An excess number of animals accumulated on farms, with nowhere to go. Rather than retain these healthy animals, producers eliminated entire herds or flocks of animals through “[intentional depopulation](#),” including using two particularly inhumane methods: ventilation shutdown and water-based foam. These industry-wide breakdowns and their harms to animals and people highlight the need to reform this inherently fragile system and shift towards supporting more resilient and humane farming models.

Stop extreme-speed slaughter

[Extreme-speed slaughter](#) exposes animals to increased risk of rough handling and botched stunning, including dismemberment or drowning of animals in scalding water while conscious, in violation of humane slaughter laws and regulations. Additionally, faster slaughter lines present serious threats to worker safety and public health. Workers in slaughterhouses already experience repetitive motion injuries at rates nearly seven times higher than the average factory worker; increased line speeds require even more repetitious movements. Extreme-speed slaughter also compromises food safety—according to a [Washington Post article](#), public records show that meat from pig slaughterhouses that were allowed to operate at faster speeds contained higher rates of contamination from fecal and digestive matter, which contain deadly pathogens such as E. coli and salmonella. Increased line speeds also result in more animals being raised for food, more animals being slaughtered, and more waste being produced, thereby further contributing to environmental degradation and accelerated climate impacts caused by industrial factory farming.



While COVID-19 was spreading rapidly in slaughterhouses and surrounding communities, the USDA continued to allow companies to increase the speeds of their slaughter lines above regulatory caps. In April 2020, the USDA issued a record number of approvals or waivers to chicken slaughterhouses, even though extreme-speed slaughter makes social distancing harder for line workers. An analysis by the National Employment Law Project found that each of the 15 slaughterhouses granted a waiver during April had a record of severe injuries, was cited for worker safety violations, and/or became a COVID-19 hotspot. [As of May 18, 2021](#), at least 58,734 slaughterhouse and meatpacking workers have tested positive, and at least 293 workers and 5 USDA inspectors have died from COVID-19.

To stop dangerous extreme-speed slaughter during the pandemic, the ASPCA urges the Biden-Harris administration to abandon these dangerous policies. Specifically, we ask the administration to: (1) rescind the Modernization of Swine Slaughter Inspection Rule, which allows pig slaughterhouses to convert to a deregulated slaughter inspection model with no set speed limit; (2) discontinue the policy of issuing line speed waivers to slaughterhouses; and (3) rescind

existing waivers. In February 2021, we joined 64 other groups in [urging USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack](#) to take these actions, among others related to reforming our cruel factory farming system, under President Biden’s [Executive Order on Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis](#).

We also urge Congress to immediately pass the [Safe Line Speeds During COVID-19 Act](#) (S. 713/H.R. 1518), legislation introduced in the Senate by Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) and 11 other senators, and in the House by Representatives Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), Bennie Thompson (D-MS) and 22 other representatives. The bill would protect animals, workers, and consumers by prohibiting dangerous, higher-speed slaughter systems from operating during the COVID-19 pandemic. The bill also directs the Government Accountability Office to conduct a review of actions taken by the USDA in response to the pandemic, to determine their effectiveness in protecting animal, food, and worker safety.

Prohibit government reimbursement for the cruelest methods of intentional depopulation

The COVID-19 crisis has underscored the dire consequences for animals that result from failure to prepare for disasters and emergencies, including for farm animals. The spread of COVID-19 among slaughterhouse employees and inspectors resulted in slaughterhouse shutdowns and backlogs of slaughter-bound animals on farms—leading to the “depopulation,” or mass killing, of millions of pigs, chickens and cattle. During depopulation, entire flocks or herds are killed because the agriculture industry has not made preparations for another way of addressing an emergency that prevents the regular slaughter process or humane euthanasia. Some of the methods used to kill “excess” animals, such as ventilation shutdown and water-based foam, are particularly inhumane. To kill chickens and pigs using ventilation shutdown, workers shut off barns’ ventilation systems with animals sealed inside, where they slowly die from overheating and suffocation. Water-based foam—often used in the poultry industry—essentially drowns or suffocates animals with a foam that obstructs their airways and causes death over several stressful and agonizing minutes.



Not surprisingly, Big Ag continues to lobby federal lawmakers for funding to compensate for depopulation-related profit losses, with no corresponding welfare-related accountability. The ASPCA calls on Congress to ensure that federal tax dollars will not be used to reimburse producers for the [most inhumane “depopulation” methods](#). Congress must also ensure that producers be required to take preventive measures to mitigate or eliminate use of these particular depopulation methods.

Promote the shift towards a more humane farming system



In November 2020, the ASPCA released data from a new [public opinion survey](#) conducted by Lake Research Partners, showing that the COVID-19 crisis has elevated already high levels of public concern about the disastrous impacts of industrial animal agriculture. It has powerfully reinforced the direct connection between inherently inhumane treatment of farm animals and human health risks. Driven by [stories](#) that have emerged throughout the pandemic documenting abuses on industrial farms and slaughterhouses, consumers are seeking alternatives to factory-farmed meat, eggs and dairy. Not surprisingly, the survey revealed strong bipartisan support for policies that would check the abuses of [factory farming](#), including slowing slaughter line speeds and funding farmers' transitions to higher-welfare farming systems.

Federal relief funds should not prop up the worst possible practices, but instead should be reserved for those who are using better practices that benefit animals, workers and farmers. We must invest COVID-19 relief funds in building a more compassionate and sustainable food system. Higher-welfare farming is not only better for animals, but its practices are also less likely to contribute to pandemics such as the one we face today.

To help support a more resilient, humane, and healthy agriculture system, we urge Congress to pass the [Farm System Reform Act](#), legislation that would assist farmers in moving away from destructive concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) and towards higher-welfare-certified farming and alternative crop production.

Recommendations

The ASPCA urges policymakers to quickly address these concerns and prevent animal suffering in future disasters through the following actions:

1. **Community Sheltering and Safety Nets:** Immediately provide federal support for animal shelters and welfare organizations.
2. **Housing:** Continue the moratorium on evictions as necessary and expand pet-inclusive federal housing programs to keep pets and people together.
3. **Disaster Planning:** Immediately require commercial animal facilities licensed under the Animal Welfare Act to have emergency animal care plans in place and train their employees accordingly.
 - a. We urge the USDA to immediately move forward with the process to reinstate the delayed emergency planning rule.
 - b. We also urge Congress to pass the [PREPARED Act](#) (H.R. 1442).
4. **Proper Oversight:** Conduct oversight of the USDA's Animal Care program to investigate whether the agency took proper actions to ensure animals' welfare during the pandemic.
 - a. We urge Congress to address glaring problems with the USDA's implementation and enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act.
5. **Protecting Farm Animals and Workers:** Immediately stop extreme-speed slaughter.
 - a. We urge the Biden-Harris administration to reverse the dangerous extreme-speed slaughter policies allowed by the previous administration, especially for the duration of the pandemic.
 - b. We also urge Congress to pass the [Safe Line Speeds During COVID-19](#) (S. 713/H.R. 1815)
6. **Preventing Inhumane Practices:** Ensure that federal tax dollars aren't used to support or reimburse inhumane depopulation methods.
7. **Supporting More Humane Farming:** Reform animal agriculture by transitioning away from our cruel industrial system to a more humane, healthy, and resilient system.
 - a. We urge the USDA to invest COVID-19 relief funds in higher-welfare farming systems.
 - b. Finally, we urge Congress to pass the Farm System Reform Act.