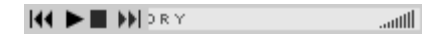




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Meat recall fallout



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Special Section: [Beef Recall](#)

SACRAMENTO - Authorities would be able to prosecute the operators of meatpacking plants that slaughter weak or diseased cows for food under a bill that passed its first legislative test Tuesday.

The legislation stems from the February recall of 143 million pounds of beef from Chino's Westland/Hallmark Meat Co. following the release of an undercover video showing the plant's workers using electric prods, forklifts and other methods to get so-called downer cows to go to slaughter.

Federal law bans downer cows from entering the meat supply to protect against mad cow disease and other ailments.

Tuesday's measure passed the Assembly Public Safety with only one no vote.

San Bernardino County District Attorney Michael Ramos, whose office is prosecuting workers seen in the video, said the bill would have let his office also go after company officials.

"You see the video and it's very obvious that there are downed cows. But we were only able to file on those employees that were actually doing the abuse and cruelty to the animals," Ramos said. "If we had had this bill in place, we would have been able to hold the owners responsible as well."

State law already bans the slaughtering of downer animals in plants inspected by the state and governs how animals are handled.

Most plants in California, though, are inspected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The bill by Assemblyman Paul Krekorian, D-Burbank, would specifically prohibit the slaughtering of downer animals for human consumption.

Krekorian said his bill will take away the financial incentives to sell beef made from downer cows.

"Operators will now know they will face criminal penalties but they also will be unable to sell their meat," Krekorian said, adding that he wants the bill to apply even to meat shipped out of California.

Krekorian initially proposed that violators would face a felony, with possible prison time. Tuesday, he agreed to reduce the penalty to a misdemeanor, with possible jail time and a fine of up to \$20,000.

The dairy and cattle industries support the bill's intent and are working with Krekorian on minor changes, representatives said.

"We've always thought that non-ambulatory animals should not be delivered to auction yards, slaughterhouses. They should be euthanized or taken care of on the ranch and sent to rendering plants," said Bill Thomas, second vice president of the California Cattlemen's Association.

An employee of the Humane Society of the United States secretly shot the Westland/Hallmark video.

Wayne Pacelle, the organization's president, said the bill would make California a leader in keeping downer cows out of the food supply.

"We should have something on the front end to deter this kind of behavior so we don't have these economic calamities," he said, estimating that this year's recall cost more than \$1 billion.

Gov. Schwarzenegger has not taken a position on the measure, his office said.

Krekorian's bill is one of two bills so far to arise from the Westland/Hallmark recall. Legislation by state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, would put state-monitored video cameras in beef and poultry plants. It also would require the state to reimburse school districts for recall costs.

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