



Calves isolated in hutches at Alexandre Family Farm in Ferndale, California. Alexandre's 4,500 cows, which give birth to 4,000 calves a year, make it one of the largest organic dairy producers in the country. (Justin Maxon for The Atlantic)

IDEAS



THE TRUTH ABOUT ORGANIC MILK

Cows are suffering on even the most “humane” dairy farms.

By Annie Lowrey

Photographs by Justin Maxon for The Atlantic

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THIS WINTER, I attended a livestock auction on California's remote northern coast. Ranchers sat on plywood bleachers warming their hands as the auctioneer mumble-chanted and handlers flushed cows into a viewing paddock one by one. Most of the cows were hale animals, careering in and cantering out. But one little brown cow moved tentatively, rheum slicking her left eye and a denim patch covering her right.

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That night, I went to take a closer look at her along with a pair of animal-welfare investigators and some of the traders who had participated in the auction. Cow 13039, as her ear tag identified her, was segregated with other sick or injured cattle in a pen near the viewing paddock. A farmhand led her into a squeeze chute, so that I could see her udders and feel her bony sides and scratch her head.

The denim patch had been glued straight onto her right orbital rim. I helped work up the patch's edge; when a rancher finally ripped it off, her eyeball swelled from its socket, tethered to her skull by muscle and sinew and skin. Unable to focus, the eye rotated wildly. It had ruptured, its wet inner contents extruding from the broken membrane; blood and green pus supplicated from its edges, smelling of copper and must. The cow had "cancer eye," the rancher who had purchased her guessed, the most common bovine cancer.

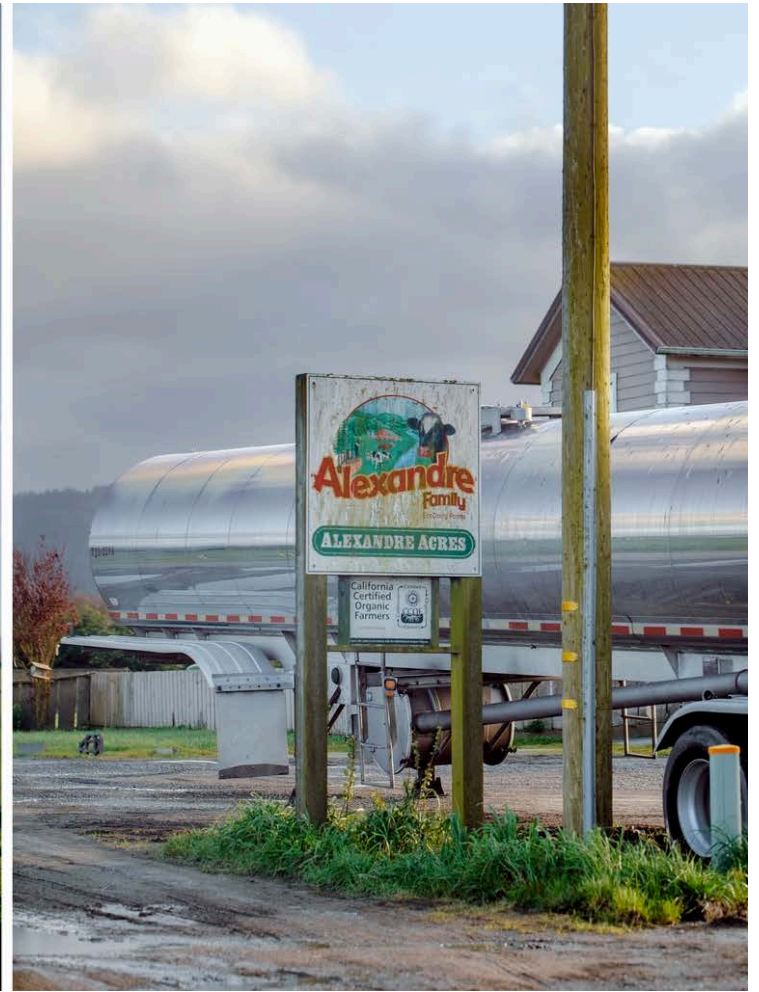
Cow 13039, the auction affidavit showed, came from one of the country's preeminent dairy farms: Alexandre Family Farm, a nationwide supplier to stores including Whole Foods. Alexandre cows are pasture-raised, and the operation is validated by California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), Certified Humane, and the Regenerative Organic Alliance. Its owners, Blake and Stephanie Alexandre, won the Organic Farmer of the Year award a few years back and have been profiled by *The New York Times*. For \$8, you can buy about a third of a gallon of its top-shelf milk.

Annie Lowrey: Radical vegans are trying to change your diet

The Alexandres sold dozens of grievously ill and injured cows at auction over the past four years, according to a sprawling whistleblower report published by the nonprofit advocacy group Farm Forward. On the farm, the report charges, mismanagement led to “the extreme suffering of hundreds of cows.” One whistleblower contacted the local sheriff and the United States Department of Agriculture, among other organizations, to report animal-welfare violations, but without results. The report is based on hundreds of location- and date-tagged photographs and videos collected over a four-year period by people who worked either with or for Alexandre Family Farm, as well as on affidavits, veterinary reports, and interviews.



(Justin Maxon for *The Atlantic*)



Alexandre Family Farm really is a family farm, run by the Alexandres and staffed by some of their children, on multiple sites in Del Norte and Humboldt Counties. Blake and Stephanie met while studying at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo in the early 1980s, and from there built a pasture-raised empire. Alexandre's 4,500 cows, which give birth to 4,000 calves a year, make it one of the largest organic dairy farms in the country.

In March, I visited the farm to ask the Alexandres about the report. In that conversation, they questioned the motivations of the whistleblowers, speculating that they were disgruntled former employees and associates, and ventured that some of the photographs might have been staged or doctored.

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They described some of the depicted incidents as false, implausible, or exaggerated, while saying that others were tragedies or accidents to which they had responded with corrective action.

“Stuff happens,” Blake told me, as we sat at his kitchen table. “Employees make mistakes. We make mistakes. We try to fix them when we become aware of them.”



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Alexandre is not just any farm; it is esteemed by chefs, politicians, and advocates for humane agriculture, and consumers seek out its products. The report implicates not just the farm but also the certification programs that farms like it use to assure consumers that the food they are eating is ethically sourced and cruelty-free. And it implicates the government, which does little to protect the welfare of farm animals. Laws are lax and enforcement is even more lax, despite widespread public support for animal protection.

When I met Cow 13039, a dying animal sold to the highest bidder, I thought that the system had failed her. But in reporting this story, I found something far more disconcerting. No system had failed her, because there was no system to protect her in the first place.

ONE THING is not in dispute: Alexandre cows live a life far better than those on the mega-operations that produce most of the country's milk. They eat grass and hay instead of pellets made from corn and soybeans. They have daily access to pasture and live in herds, rather than being isolated in stalls. (Cows are sociable animals—personality-wise, they're a lot like dogs.)

The promise of happy, healthy cows has fueled the company's success. The farm won an award from Whole Foods in 2020 and is one of only six Certified Humane bovine-dairy operations in the United States. The Alexandres have become outspoken advocates of back-to-the-earth farming; Blake was appointed to a state agricultural committee and is now on a California regenerative-farming commission.

But many Alexandre cows are neither happy nor healthy, the Farm Forward report concludes. "Most of the whistleblower or undercover investigations that are done on animal farm operations are a couple of videos ... maybe one whistleblower coming forward," Andrew deCoriolis, Farm Forward's executive director, told me. "The thing that makes this unique is the totality of the evidence."

Annie Lowrey: What's different about the Impossible Burger?

The details in the report are horrifying: a cow with mastitis having her teat cut off with a knife. A cow sent to auction with a spinal-cord injury that had left her incontinent and partly paralyzed. A live, alert cow being dragged by a skid steer. A cow that could not walk being left in a field for two weeks before being euthanized. Cows sprayed with a caustic combination of mineral oil and diesel fuel to tamp down on a fly infestation (which, a whistleblower says in the report, they were told to lie about to an inspector).

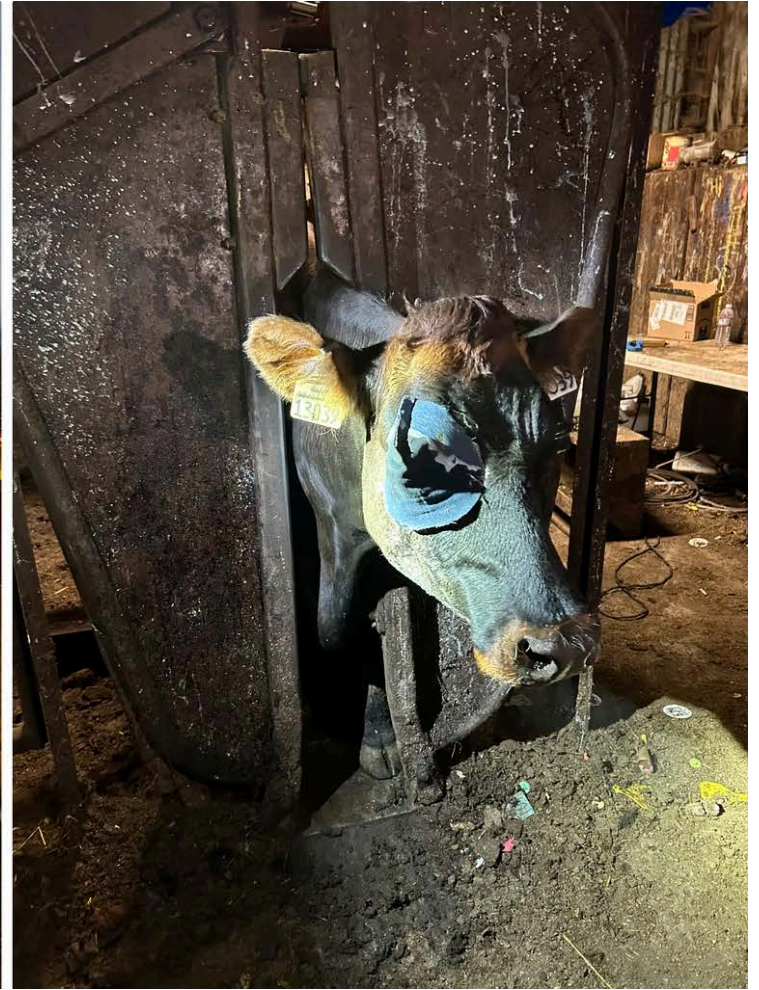
At their farm, in a written response, and in a follow-up conversation, the Alexandres described such incidents as improbable, given the farm's protocols. "Cutting teats off" has "never been a practice on our dairy farms," they told me. They said that injured cows received medical treatment and when necessary were moved safely, without dragging. A farm worker had mixed red diesel into a fly spray, they told me, because that made it easier to see where the spray had been applied, and the farm stopped the practice when management learned about it.

Former employees said that sick cows were regularly denied antibiotics for mastitis and hoof infections, at least in part to maintain their milk as organic—a charge corroborated by an Alexandre farm worker not involved in the report. (Once a cow is given antibiotics, her milk must be sold as conventional for the duration of her life.) The farm has "natural" treatments that "allow us to not need synthetic antibiotics," Vanessa Nunes, Blake and Stephanie's daughter and a dairy manager at the operation, told me. "We don't need to give an antibiotic for mastitis. We have a tincture that we'll use." (Mastitis can be debilitating when not treated with antibiotics.)

Whistleblowers also said cows with infections had their eyes packed with salt and had denim patches glued to their skulls. The farm responded that cows with pink eye were treated using a saline solution with cod-liver oil, and sometimes with apple cider vinegar. The farm said that the denim patch was a "gold standard" method to cure pink eye.

Jim Reynolds, a large-animal veterinarian, told me that salt would be “horrible” to use in any animal’s eye and that patches had no medical benefit, and could worsen an infection by trapping dirt and irritating the eye. “I don’t know that it’s been recommended since the 1980s,” he said. He told me that the farm’s treatment for eye infections was “nonsense.”

Dairy cows generally have their horn buds destroyed with a caustic paste or a hot iron in the first weeks of life. But the report describes an incident in which Alexandre let hundreds of calves grow horns and then dehorned them as adults with a sawzall, a handheld construction tool. Horns are innervated, like fingers, not inert, like fingernails; the cows were not given anesthetic. The Alexandres said that the employees cut off only the tips of the cows’ horns, which are not sensitive, to prevent them from injuring people or other animals, and that it was a onetime event.



Left: The auction yard where Alexandre Family Farm cows are sold. *Right:* Cow 13039, with the denim patch over her eye. (Justin Maxon for *The Atlantic*; courtesy of the author)

Mismanagement at least once led to mass death, the report charges, when hay deliveries ran late. The whistleblowers said the animals were so famished by the time the feed truck arrived that they stampeded, and many were trampled to death or needed to be euthanized soon after. The Alexandres described this as a “tragic accident” involving 30 cows who were without food for only a few hours after an equipment breakdown; the farm said it had implemented new protocols to prevent anything similar from happening again.

The farm also contested the notion that it would send ailing cows to auction, rather than euthanizing them; the auction facility would not accept such animals, the Alexandres told me, something Leland Mora, the head of the auction house, confirmed. Still, on a random Wednesday, I went to that auction. And I met an Alexandre cow with what looked like metastatic cancer, her eyeball swelling out of her head.

MOST AMERICAN CONSUMERS abhor animal cruelty and support laws preventing it. In a recent ASPCA survey, three-quarters or more of respondents said they were concerned about farm-animal welfare and supported a ban on new factory farms. Yet cruelty, even egregious cruelty, against farm animals is often legal, provided that the suffering is “necessary” and “justifiable” by the need for farms to produce food, David Rosengard of the Animal Legal Defense Fund told me.

To determine what is “necessary” and “justifiable,” lawyers and juries often look at what farms are already doing, what agricultural schools are teaching, and what Big Ag publications recommend. In effect, I gathered, animal-welfare law is slanted toward the needs of farms much more than the experience of animals.

Even gratuitously abusive treatment often goes unpunished. Local authorities have jurisdiction over most animal-cruelty complaints. But cows, pigs, and chickens are not great at picking up the telephone to call those authorities. Animal-rights activists are able to perform investigations only sporadically, and at significant legal risk to themselves. Farm workers, many of whom are undocumented immigrants, rarely report violations.

Peter Singer: The meat paradox

Plus, as I learned from speaking with the Alexandres and interviewing the whistleblowers, agricultural communities are tight-knit. The people involved in this story have long, complicated histories with one another—personal grievances, financial entanglements, legal disputes. The whistleblowers declined to be quoted by name, fearing for their livelihoods, save for one, a rancher named Ray Christie, who has bought hundreds if not thousands of Alexandre cattle. In 2009, after a raid, he was put on two-year probation for possessing cockfighting instruments; in 2018, he was charged with felony animal cruelty himself over the state of his cows. (He recently accepted a plea bargain, agreeing to misdemeanor littering charges for improperly disposing of animal carcasses.) Given the personalities involved, I focused on the documentary evidence about the cows themselves.

The condition of some Alexandre cattle spurred one of the whistleblowers to try to get law enforcement involved. In January 2021, the whistleblower told Humboldt County Sheriff William F. Honsal that mistreated Alexandre cattle were being sold at auction, and sent him photos and videos of the cows. The sheriff responded, saying that he would send a deputy to the auction house; the sheriff's office later referred the whistleblower to animal control. (The sheriff did not respond to requests for comment, and the Alexandres told me they had never been visited by a police officer.)

The whistleblower also attempted to involve a local state veterinarian, Meghan Mott. Mott is a mandated reporter of animal abuse, and frequently attended auctions at the facility I visited. Why hadn't she intervened? I could not reach her for comment, but Steve Lyle, the director of public affairs at the California Department of Food and Agriculture, told me that the head state veterinarian "tries to convey the idea of 'if you see something, say something' to staff." But he explained that state veterinarians are functionally epidemiologists, checking for conditions like influenza. "If an animal is sick and the cause is not one of the emergency or regulated diseases requiring CDFA action," care would be the responsibility of the animal's owner, and negligence the responsibility of law enforcement.

Finally, the whistleblower went to the USDA. The agency has regulatory authority over American farms, but does not perform animal-welfare inspections. "There's a regulatory system in place to make sure that if we eat a cheeseburger from McDonald's, we're not going to get *E. coli*," Amanda Hitt, the founder of the Food Integrity Campaign at the Government Accountability Project, told me. "That doesn't happen in animal welfare."

That said, the USDA does administer the National Organic Program, which mandates that animals have "sufficient nutrition," are given "medicines to minimize pain, stress and suffering," and are "fit for transport" when they are sent to slaughter. But the NOP is mainly aimed at environmental stewardship. Its humane standards are low, and sometimes counterproductive. The program's restrictions on the use of antibiotics, for instance—intended to prevent farmers from providing the drugs prophylactically,

which facilitates overcrowding and contributes to antibiotic resistance—leads farmers to withhold medicine from sick animals, too. That's particularly cruel for newborns and recently delivered mothers, who are especially vulnerable to infection. (Other countries do things differently: The European Union allows organic dairy cows to get antibiotics up to three times a year.)

Ag agencies don't make great cops. The NOP does not audit farms directly, instead relying on third-party certifiers that farms themselves sometimes pick, accommodating widespread fraud. California Certified Organic Farmers performs surprise visits, tests for pesticide residue, does intensive paperwork audits, and sometimes stakes out farms to make sure animals are really living outside, April Vasquez, CCOF's chief certification officer, told me. But it is also a trade group that promotes organic agriculture and financially supports at-risk farms; its board is made up of organic farmers. Stephanie Alexandre sat on it for years.

The USDA passed the whistleblower's complaint to the CDFR, which sent a state special investigator to the Alexandre farm sites in May 2023. A USDA document obtained by a Freedom of Information Act request shows that the investigation found no wrongdoing. Talking about fraud in the organic program with a USDA officer, the whistleblower became incensed on behalf of the cows and the consumers shelling out for supposedly high-quality products. "You got these single-parent homes, the moms, the young couples, struggling with all the inflation going up," the whistleblower said.

“They’re going to the store, spending their money on this stuff, thinking it’s the best thing for their kids. And it’s all bullshit!”



A compost pile with cow carcasses at Alexandre Family Farm (Justin Maxon for *The Atlantic*)

THE REGULATORY VOID around animal welfare has been filled by dedicated nonprofits offering their own certifications for farms meeting high standards. The godparent of this private system is Adele Douglass Jolley, a former employee of the American Humane Association. In 2000, while touring pig farms in the U.K., Jolley learned about the animal-welfare verification program run by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. She cashed out her 401(k) to set up a similar program stateside.

Now called Certified Humane, it gives its seal of approval to hundreds of operations caring for 417 million animals in 25 countries. Auditors ensure that farms are meeting its standards, which are set by an independent panel of experts. Farms pay a monthly fee, and they (or the companies packaging the food they produce) get to put the Certified Humane logo on their products—and charge consumers more. But the whistleblower report indicates that Alexandre was far out of compliance. Why hadn't Certified Humane caught the cruelty?

Perhaps because Alexandre *does* meet the program's general standards. Its cows live in herds on pasture; they eat grass and hay; they are not given preventive antibiotics. Perhaps because the private certification system is based on trust and support as much as verification and skepticism. Audits generally happen only once a year, in consultation with the farms in question. Farmers sometimes know their auditors. Producers found to be out of compliance are given a chance to correct the problems.

Certified Humane provided Alexandre with its stamp of approval in early 2021. (Some of the incidents in the whistleblower report predate the farm's relationship with the nonprofit.) In 2022, Certified Humane received a complaint from one of the whistleblowers about cruelty on the farm. The complainant had taken photographs of two cows they said had eye injuries, Mimi Stein, the group's executive director, told me in an interview. "These were some very strange pictures," she told me. "They were not high quality."

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When Stein called the Alexandres to ask what had happened, they were “upset” and “passionate,” she told me. They said one cow had had an eye damaged after sale and the other was “fine, as much as anybody could tell.” Stein’s sense was that the Alexandres “would have taken care of them and euthanized them on site” had they been severely injured or ill, as Certified Humane requires.

The organization followed up with an in-person audit, which found no problems. Basically, Stein told me, “if animals were that damaged, chances are they wouldn’t sell them, because they wouldn’t have any value. It just wouldn’t make any sense.”

Alexandre also touts its certification from the Regenerative Organic Alliance, which holds farms to even higher animal-welfare standards. Elizabeth Whitlow, its executive director, told me that the incidents and practices depicted in the report would represent gross violations of its rules. But I was surprised to learn that only a small share of Alexandre cows are actually certified by the group.

You couldn’t blame a consumer for being bewildered—about what is going on with Alexandre products or any others bearing a claim about the conditions in which the animals are raised. There are more than a dozen humane certifiers, some with rigorous standards, some that are just industry fronts. “It has this patina of a Yelp review: five stars for this processor!” Hitt, the founder of the Food Integrity Campaign, told me.

“This is a certification to make you feel better about eating a certain product. But it has no basis in any kind of reality.”

In addition to certification logos, products feature wholesome-sounding but hard-to-parse terms: *free-roaming*, *naturally grown*, *ethically raised*. For some, such as *free-range*, the USDA sets a standard and asks companies for evidence of compliance. But enforcement is patchy, and the USDA has in the past accepted applications with little or no substantiation. For others, the USDA sets no standards at all. Food manufacturers know they can charge more for products that consumers think are ethical, Dena Jones, who directs the farmed-animal program at the Animal Welfare Institute, told me. So companies just “start slapping” words and logos on things.

The USDA, to its credit, is tightening up its rules and enforcement. Yet dairy will still “fall through the cracks,” Jones told me. The labels on milk and yogurt are the purview of the Food and Drug Administration, not the USDA. And the FDA holds that it has no role in validating animal-raising claims. As far as the federal government is concerned, when it comes to milk and the cows that produce it, anyone can claim almost anything.



(Justin Maxon for *The Atlantic*)

THE ALEXANDRE FARM I toured with the family occupies a damp flat between the Pacific Ocean and an old-growth redwood forest. Hundreds of fat, calm cows chewed emerald grass and slept in the mist alongside a herd of wild elk. Heavily pregnant cows idled in a spacious barn, overseen 24 hours a day by a herdsman. Younger cows rushed up to meet me.

The farm appeared to provide as close to perfect conditions as possible, I thought. Yet dairy is *hard*—that was something I heard again and again while reporting this piece. On ranches, beef cattle live outdoors, mostly undisturbed, before being moved to feedlots; mothers and calves spend months together. In contrast, dairy cows are repeatedly inseminated or bred, calved, and separated from their babies. They are milked twice a day. And when their bodies begin to give out, they keep getting milked until they are euthanized or slaughtered.

Jorie Chadbourne, a retired brand inspector (a government official who verifies an animal's ownership at the point of sale or slaughter), told me the Alexandre cows she had encountered over the years were no better or worse than those from other organic farms in the region. But, she added, at auction, organic cows were usually in worse shape than conventional cows, because of the program's medication restrictions: "It is like an older person, at the end of their life, not having medicine to comfort them or make them well." (She told me the antibiotic rules are why she raises her own animals conventionally.)

The best certifiers, like Certified Humane, are great at validating farms' general conditions. But, as Mimi Stein noted, the program certifies the farm—not the animal. Cows get sold off. Cruel incidents happen. And many other certifiers are less rigorous.

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What is a consumer who wants to support a gentle, green system of agriculture to do? DeCoriolis of Farm Forward had a blunt answer: Give up dairy. “As a consumer, you’re just playing roulette,” he told me. Yet the overwhelming majority of American consumers are unwilling to give up milk or cheese for ethical reasons. What they are willing to do is support stricter rules for agricultural producers and pay more for milk and cheese from farms that treat their animals well. The country is failing to provide those consumers with a reliable and navigable system. That’s a policy problem, and a solvable one.

At a minimum, the USDA should require third-party certification of animal-welfare and animal-raising claims, and apply strict regulations to certifiers: preventing conflicts of interest, requiring surprise inspections, and cracking down on rubber-stamping of industry norms. To meet American consumers’ more ambitious demands, Congress should create a farmed-animal welfare standard and an agency separate from the USDA to enforce it, akin to the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Such changes would improve the welfare of billions of animals in our food system. Yet any changes would be too late for one. In the end, nobody stepped in to aid Cow 13039—not law enforcement, not the state veterinarians, not the auction employees. Alexandre Family Farm gave her vitamins and an eye patch, Nunes told me. They should have sold her sooner, she said. Cow 13039 was ailing. And ailing cows are not worth much.

~~\$117, less auction fees, she spent the final moments of her life not grazing on pasture~~
with her herd but isolated, hungry, terrified, and in pain. Ray Christie's brother, also a rancher, had purchased her. But she was too sick to have her eye excised. At the slaughterhouse, her carcass would have been condemned.

The morning after I met her, a farmhand shot her between her blighted eyes.

Gisela Salim-Peyer contributed reporting to this story.

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