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Guest opinion: Oppose PAUSE — Support ranchers and animals

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Debbie Bruell



Farmers and ranchers in Colorado need to be at the table when decisions are being made regarding agriculture in our state. They are the ones who understand the everyday reality of growing crops and raising livestock. They have critical insights into how to be good stewards of the land and animals.

All too often, rural communities are left out of the process of designing laws aimed at rural communities. The proposed PAUSE Act, Colorado Initiative 16, is a case in point.

PAUSE was initiated by animal welfare activists seeking to protect farm animals from unnecessary suffering and exploitation. The lack of input from the ranching community into this initiative is evident. PAUSE is based on inaccurate information about raising livestock, outlaws practices that actually benefit animals, and could have a significant negative impact on ranchers' ability to earn a living in Colorado.

Governor Polis, the Colorado Democratic Party's Rural Initiative, and the Garfield County Democrats all oppose the PAUSE Act. We urge you not to sign the petition being circulated to put this initiative on the ballot.

Despite what the promoters of the PAUSE Act suggest, ranchers across Colorado care deeply about the well-being of their animals. If animal welfare activists want to make a real impact on the treatment of animals, they should focus their efforts on multinational corporations that currently control food production and supply systems in the U.S.

By far, the worst abuse against cows, chickens and other animals happens in "confined animal feeding operations," or CAFO's, operated by these industrial ag corporations. It is these same corporations that manipulate the marketplace to push down the prices paid to independent ranchers, driving them out of business and off their land.

In 1985, Willie Nelson, Neil Young, and John Mellencamp organized a huge Farm Aid concert to increase awareness about these threats to family farms and raise funds to keep farm families on the land. Farm Aid is now a nonprofit that continues to organize an annual music festival as well as other efforts to support and defend family farms.

As explained on the Farm Aid website, a handful of Big Ag corporations are undercutting family farmers and ranchers in their never-ending race to increase corporate profits. As John Mellencamp points out, "They don't care about the normal guy, the small family farmer."

Instead of promoting the PAUSE Act, animal welfare activists should join forces with groups like Farm Aid, Rocky Mountain Farmers Union, and American Grassfed Association to push for national legislation that would eliminate industrial agriculture's strangleho' on the marketplace.

The Farm Systems Reform Act of 2019 did not succeed in the previous Republican-controlled Congress, but it's exactly the kind of legislation we need. It would have placed a moratorium on large concentrated animal feeding operations, eliminating the abuse caused by CAFO's and supporting independent ranchers by leveling the economic playing field. It also would have protected farmers and ranchers from unfair and deceptive practices of monopolistic ag corporations. And it would have required country of origin labeling on beef, pork, and dairy products, a big boost for U.S. family farmers and ranchers.

People across our state—from our cities to our small towns—want hardworking people to be able to earn enough to support their families. We want to keep our land and water healthy for future generations. We want to feed our children healthy food. We want to address and reverse climate change. And we want animals to be treated decently. The Farm Systems Reform Act would have served all of these purposes at once.

It would not have served to increase the already enormous profits of a handful of multinational ag corporations.

Big Ag has been successfully challenged before by diverse groups when they joined together. Large corporate-owned growers in California were paying their laborers an average of 90 cents an hour to pick grapes in 1965. Child labor was rampant. Families were living in company “housing” that consisted of metal shacks. Laborers of Mexican descent, led by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, joined forces with farmworkers of Filipino descent. Consumers across the country lent support to their struggle by boycotting non-union California grapes. The result? Farm workers won an increase in pay and the right to unionize.

We must once again fight against the giant industrial ag corporations that are stacking the deck against family farmers and ranchers across our state and our country. These corporations are also raising animals in horrific conditions, producing unhealthy food for us, destroying our soil, polluting our waters, and contributing significantly to climate change.

Let's work together to push for legislation that would limit the power of multinational industrial ag corporations and stand up for smaller producers. In the meantime, please decline to sign the petition for the PAUSE Act, Colorado Initiative 16, a misguided effort that fails to consider the impact it would have on ranchers in communities like ours.

Debbie Bruell of Carbondale serves as chair of the Garfield County Democrats.

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