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Costco Responds to Animal Cruelty Charge

The mega-popular chain store pledges humane treatment of veal calves

Updated 6:15 AM PDT, Thu, Sep 2, 2010

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Following the release of video purportedly showing animal cruelty at a supplier's farm, Costco Wholesale vowed Wednesday to make sure the calves that produce the veal on its shelves are treated humanely.

"We're very disappointed not only in our vendor but ourselves," Jeff Lyons, Costco's senior vice president of fresh foods, said. "We didn't know this was taking place."

The video taken by the animal rights group, Mercy For Animals, at Ohio-based Buckeye Veal farm in April showed rows of narrow wooden stalls, each of which housed a calf chained by its neck to a low bar.

The calves were unable to turn around or even lie down comfortably. Some could be seen trying to pull free. Several were covered in feces.

Mercy for Animals' Nathan Runkle said today, "Costco has, literally, taken a step forward on this important issue."

"However, consumers should know that crate-free doesn't mean cruelty-free," he added. "Ditching veal is the most compassionate choice shoppers can make to prevent animal abuse."

Lyons said Costco has ordered its supplier -- Atlantic Veal and Lamb Inc. -- to trace all the veal that became part of Costco's inventory.

"(Atlantic Veal is) right now on notice to provide the lot identification so that we can identify the farms that have the proper handling procedures," Lyons said.

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`` We will then audit those farms and make sure that is a true statement, and once that's done, we will continue to do business with them. But if they cannot provide that information, then we will delete the program.

`` We're going by the obligations that we've made, the commitments we've made to that vendor, and we're doing our research."

Gaylord Barkman of Buckeye Veal, said on Tuesday that the company has been in the process of switching from individual stalls to group housing, where the calves can roam and interact with other calves.

Buckeye Veal has 480 calves in individual shelves, 850 in group housing and 150 that will be moved to group housing in four weeks.

When asked whether Costco would accept calves from Buckeye Veal's group housing facility, Lyons said, ``If that manufacturer is doing something that we don't agree with but is acceptable by the Veal Association and the American Veterinary Association, that's not our business -- that's their business.

`` If they were doing something illegal, that'd be different. But if everything is approved by other entities, then they can do whatever they like. We're not going to participate in that."

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