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Downer Beef Series: Grade 'A' Journalism



Last fall, KIRO 7 Eyewitness News aired a series of stories following a six-month Team 7 Investigation into the use of so-called "downer" cows.

Here is reporter Chris Halsne's response to a column in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer on May 29 regarding our series:

The Seattle PI should be embarrassed that it so easily allowed itself to become a mouthpiece for the big-money beef and dairy industries. As a TV critic, Melanie McFarland should not be relieved of her journalistic duties to check facts.

McFarland's article, Thursday May 29th, 2003, questions the integrity and accuracy of a KIRO-TV Investigation into the downer cow industry aired on Channel 7 last year.

Her statements mysteriously mirror a complaint mailed to KIRO-TV from the Washington Beef and Dairy Commissions (and one regurgitated to the Washington News Council).

For that 4-part series, KIRO Team 7 Investigators talked with 68 sources, recorded hours of undercover videotape of cattle sale transactions, dug through thousands of public records, and interviewed dozens of nationally recognized experts on downer cows. Our investigative report was clear, verifiable,



DOWNER COWS INVESTIGATION

[Meat From Dying, Sick Or Diseased Cows Getting into Food](#)

Aired Oct. 31, 2002, 5 p. m.

[Volatile Reaction From Viewers, Feds, To Meat Investigation](#)

Aired Oct. 31, 2002, 11 p. m.

[Downer Cows' Treatment May Be Illegal](#)

Aired Nov. 1, 2002, 5 p. m.

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balanced and fair.

"Downers" are typically dairy cattle at the end of their productive lives. These cows are called "downers" because they cannot walk into the slaughterhouse. They are too sick or too injured to even stand, so meat processors drag, hoist, and chain the "downer" cows by the neck to get them inside the plant.

The use of these cattle for food is a matter of extreme controversy and something consumers have a right to know before buying their next hamburger. Sadly, the idea of informing the public about the downer cow industry has turned into an attack on journalistic integrity.

As reporter on this story, I will clear up just a few facts the USDA and beef and dairy industries have distorted for their own purposes.

KIRO-TV journalists detailed every aspect of this investigation to high-ranking USDA compliance agents and supervisors over a two-month period prior to airing the story. This list includes the Special Agent in Charge of West Coast Operations, 2 active field compliance agents and the Acting Supervisor of Washington Inspections. All were told they could view our videotape with no strings attached because it was in the best interest of their investigation into this slaughterhouse. The USDA public relations folks in Washington DC are spinning "pure" fantasy to imply KIRO-TV played "gotcha journalism". Perhaps, the USDA didn't want proof that their meat inspectors failed repeatedly to perform a proper inspection of downer cows outside a slaughterhouse in Chehalis.

KIRO-TV not only stands by every detail of its downer cow investigation, but plans to air more stories in the near future that shed a bright light on the business of using low-quality, high risk cattle for human consumption.

KIRO-TV's investigative team doesn't shy away from stories that challenge big business, big government, or powerful people and organizations. We understand fully that these kinds of subjects have lots of money and the capability of lashing back at the messenger. In this case, it's the Beef and Dairy Commissions. They claim their attack on KIRO-TV is just a way to "create a sort of firewall for the future in the way that folks report about agriculture."

In reality, big-money beef and dairy promoters are out to protect themselves, their industry, their profits and their political interests by silencing future journalists who dare question them. KIRO TV's sole interest is to protect the public.

Chris Halsne
KIRO-TV Investigative Reporter

 [Downer Industry Thrives Despite Consumers' Concerns](#)
Aired Nov. 1, 2002, 11 p. m.

 [New Revelations From Ex-State Ag Employee On Downer Cows](#)
Aired June 12, 2003, 5 p. m.

 [State Agencies Help Fund Attack On Downer Cow Investigations](#)
Aired June 12, 2003, 11 p.m.

 [Market For Downer Cow Beef Is Dying](#)
Aired June 13, 2003, 5 p. m.



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