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Court Rules Iowa Ag-Gag Law Unconstitutional in Major Victory for Free Speech and Animal Protection

Undercover investigations at factory farms protected by First Amendment

Contact: Natalia Lima, nlima@aldf.org, 201 679 7088

DES MOINES, Iowa – Today the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Iowa struck down the Iowa Ag-Gag law, holding that the ban on undercover investigations at factory farms and slaughterhouses violates the First Amendment. In 2017, the Animal Legal Defense Fund led a coalition of animal, environmental, and community advocacy groups in challenging the law’s constitutionality. Federal courts similarly struck down Ag-Gag laws in Idaho and Utah as unconstitutional.

Iowa’s Ag-Gag law criminalizes undercover investigations at a broad range of animal facilities including factory farms, puppy mills, and slaughterhouses, preventing advocates from exposing animal cruelty and environmental, workers’ rights, and food safety violations. The law achieved its goal of suppressing undercover investigations – no investigations have taken place since the law’s passage in 2012.

“Ag-Gag laws are a pernicious attempt by animal exploitation industries to hide some of the worst forms of animal abuse in the United States,” says Animal Legal Defense Fund Executive Director Stephen Wells. “Today’s victory makes it clear that the government cannot protect these industries at the expense of our constitutional rights.”

For more than a century, the public has relied on undercover investigations to expose illegal and cruel practices on factory farms and slaughterhouses. No federal laws govern the condition in which farmed animals are raised, and laws addressing slaughter and transport are laxly enforced. Undercover investigations are the primary avenue through which the public receives information about animal agriculture operations. Iowa is the biggest producer of pigs raised for meat and hens raised for eggs in the United States, making it critically important that investigations there are not suppressed.

The Animal Legal Defense Fund is the nation’s preeminent legal advocacy organization for animals and led coalitions to strike down Ag-Gag laws in Idaho and Utah. Litigation against the North Carolina Ag-Gag law is ongoing.

A copy of the decision is available upon request.

The plaintiffs in the lawsuit are the Animal Legal Defense Fund, Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Bailing Out Benji, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the Center for Food Safety. They are represented by the Animal Legal Defense Fund, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Iowa, Public Justice, and the Law Office of Matthew Strugar.

For more information, visit aldf.org.

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About the Animal Legal Defense Fund

The Animal Legal Defense Fund was founded in 1979 to protect the lives and advance the interests of animals through the legal system. To accomplish this mission, the Animal Legal Defense Fund files high-impact lawsuits to protect animals from harm; provides free legal assistance and training to prosecutors to assure that animal abusers are punished for their crimes; supports tough animal protection legislation and fights harmful legislation; and provides resources and opportunities to law students and professionals to advance the emerging field of animal law. For more information, please visit aldf.org.

About Public Justice's Food Project

The Public Justice Food Project supports rural communities, farmers, and allies to build power and achieve a just, humane, sustainable, and regenerative animal agriculture system. Public Justice pursues high impact lawsuits to combat social and economic injustice, protect the Earth's sustainability, and challenge predatory corporate conduct and government abuses.