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Pet owner feeding cat:

Zucchi, come here. Hi. You want some? Oh my gosh. It's very exciting. Oh, I know you don't need to stick your face in the bag. I'm going to give... I'm giving you some. Don't worry. Don't worry.

Jerusha Klemperer:

We love our pets a lot. A 2023 Pew Research study found that 97% of pet owners in the U.S. think of their pets as family. And there's a booming business of pet food treats and more catering to that deep love and connection we have with these animals who are living by our sides and often sleeping in our beds.

Pet owner feeding cat:

[inaudible 00:00:42]. Hi, good morning.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Of course, with that growing prominence in the family comes a growing interest on behalf of pet owners in feeding their animals better.

Pet owner feeding cat:

Want breakfast? Yes. Come on.

Jerusha Klemperer:

The natural pet food sector has exploded in recent years, and caring and concerned owners can now choose everything from a can on a shelf to a monthly delivery of human-grade food to cooking meals for their pets in their home kitchens.

Pet owner feeding cat:

Okay, Zucchini. Come here. Come here. Aww, Zucchini. Is that delicious? You didn't even chew. You just swallowed it. Here. Okay, let me.

Jerusha Klemperer:

But is there any difference between any of these foods? Are the expensive ones worth it? Is there anything wrong with the run-of-the-mill cheapest options? And if you're one of those people who thinks about your own food quite a bit but haven't really thought about your pet's food that much, should you bother changing that?

Pet owner feeding cat:

Really [inaudible 00:01:42] that. Okay, one more piece [inaudible 00:01:44], two more pieces, two more. That's it.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I'm Jerusha Klemperer, and this is What You're Eating, a project of FoodPrint.org. We aim to help you understand how your food gets to your plate and to see the full impact of the food system on animals, planet, and people.

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We uncover the problems with the industrial food system and offer examples of more sustainable practices as well as practical advice for how you can help support a better system through the food that you buy and the system changes you push for.

Marion Nestle:

I'm Marion Nestle. I'm professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health, Emerita, at New York University. I retired in 2017, and I write books about food politics. And along the way, I happened to write two books about pet food. One of them is called "Feed Your Pet Right". A very unfortunately titled book. It's not anything about feeding your pet.

It's an analysis of the pet food industry. And then a spin-off book from that was called "Pet Food Politics: The Chihuahua in the Coal Mine," which is a book about the 2006 pet food recalls because of melamine. So that makes me an expert on pet food, which I find absolutely fascinating. And I've just written a chapter about pet food for a book that's coming out next year, and I sort of stay on top of it. I think it's really fun.

Jerusha Klemperer:

So why do you think people have a blind spot about pet food? Even if they're someone who cares a lot about human food and where it comes from, and they might also be a person who cares a lot about their pet or their pets.

Marion Nestle:

Part of it is that pets started out as animals. They didn't become members of the family until quite recently. And what's called the "humanification" of pets has changed the game quite a lot. But it started out where dogs and cats were fed leftovers from human diets or from human food production. The first pet foods were made from the leftover products from slaughterhouses. That's still true. And then, as the pet food industry evolved, they got better and better about putting absolutely everything that a pet needs to eat in one product.

And an enormous amount of effort has gone into defining the nutritional requirements of pets and making sure that every nutritional requirement is covered by pet foods. And the big challenge for pet food companies is to make this stuff... the way I put it is to make this stuff taste bad enough so a pet will eat it because they like eating things that seem kind of disgusting to us but are so attractive that their owners will buy the product. And, of course, they're enormously convenient. Think of them as infant formula.

It's the same kind of thing as infant formula. They have everything in them that a pet needs. Most pets in the United States are raised on these, what are called complete and balanced formula diets, and most pets don't care. When I was writing those books, what I wished I had was some research that showed the difference in outcome and health longevity between a complete and balanced pet food that was the cheapest you could possibly buy and one that cost 10 times as much because it had some funny ingredient in it. That research doesn't exist.

Jerusha Klemperer:

So there was nothing to discover at that time, basically.

Marion Nestle:

I mean, one of the things about pet foods is that nobody studies it. The only thing that the pet food companies are interested in is will your pet eat their food instead of somebody else's. So their ingredient formulation and their flavor formulation and everything they do, it is designed to get a dog or a cat to head straight for that bowl rather than somebody else's bowl. So there are two different categories of pet foods. There are the canned ones or the dry ones, the kibble, the standard supermarket varieties, and those are formulated to be complete and balanced. You feed your pet that so you don't have to worry about anything else. And then there are people who cook for their pet themselves.

In my pet food book that I wrote with Mal Nesheim, who's an animal nutritionist, we have a recipe, a generic recipe for pet foods that meet the requirements of the organization that sets those requirements. They're pretty easy to do. I think the big advantage of the commercial pet foods is that they use up a lot of the waste products of human food production, and that's not insignificant. The animals don't care if they're eating organ meats that you don't want or I don't want. They're perfectly happy to eat them, and they're very nutritious, and that's where a lot of that stuff goes. We only have one food supply.

We don't have separate food supplies for farm animals, pets, and humans. 45% of the corn that's grown in the United States goes to feed animals, and that's true of soybeans as well. Maybe even more of soybeans. And the parts of meat production and vegetable production and all of those things where they would otherwise be thrown out, burned, put in landfills, go into pet foods, and some of that... some of those ingredients are just fine. I was once at a fish canning factory in Alaska, and they had this gorgeous salmon, and they were removing bones from the salmon, and in between the bones was all this salmon meat, and they weren't going to take out and put into canned salmon.

It was much... too much trouble. What they were going to do with all that, that was going to pet food. I thought, "Well, that's a lucky pet that's going to get that fancy salmon." So that's the good side. It's all the same food supply. It's just the different parts of it go for different purposes. And the interconnections were shown by the pet food recalls of 2006 in which Chinese suppliers of wheat gluten, which is an ingredient in pet food to boost the protein content, substituted melamine, a plastic substance that has a lot of nitrogen in it and tests for nitrogen just like protein does. So you can't tell the difference from the kinds of tests that were used, and they put melamine in the pet foods, and it killed a lot of pets.

And the shocking part about it, besides the death of the pets, which is really awful, was that the manufacturer who inadvertently put this ingredient into the pet food put that ingredient into a hundred different brands. Some of those brands were the most expensive brands that there are. Some of them were the cheapest. They were all made in the same factory. This was a big shock to people. Different formulas, but the same factory. That came as a big shock and the interconnection to the human food supply. And I wrote the book *Pet Food Politics: The Chihuahua in the Coal Mine*, because my argument in that book was that if this was happening to pet food, watch out for the human food supply.

And within a year of the time the book came out, hundreds of thousands of babies in China were drinking infant formula that had melamine in it. I felt, "Boy, did... if ever I didn't want to be right about something this was one of those times." But it certainly proved my point that these things are interconnected. And so you want to have the safest, best food supply for pets that you possibly can because it's going to protect you, and I don't think pet food is regulated nearly closely enough.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Now you said that these were the recalls of 2006, 2007. Has anything changed since then?

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Marion Nestle:

They're now testing for melamine. I would say that's the best one. Whether there's any oversight at all depends on the manufacturer. But even there, some of the manufacturers had certificates that had been signed that this was really wheat gluten. So people are looking to cut costs all the time, and everybody wants pet food to be as cheap as possible.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Right. Well, when you described that pets used to just eat human leftovers, and I thought, "Well, were they fine?" All of this careful formulation of pet food to meet all the nutritional needs, and they were just eating scraps, were those animals less healthy? Were they living shorter lives?

Marion Nestle:

How would you know? How would you know? I tried to find out what the effects on longevity were of different diets. It was impossible, just absolutely impossible. Nobody is really keeping... The best data come from some of these pet health places, but they don't always keep as good records as there could be. I mean, there's no public health service for pets, and even though pet owners would really like to know this stuff, it just doesn't exist.

I tend not to be too conspiratorial about this. Some of the other people you're going to be talking to are going to have much more conspiratorial views than I do. I just think the companies that are manufacturing pet foods are trying to make money. To take the leftover ingredients and, instead of throwing them away, do something that you can get paid for. Make sense. And there are some pretty big food companies that own pet food companies, although the turnover in who owns which brand is so fast, it's very hard to track, at least for me, venture capital and all that.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I saw that Elizabeth Warren is doing some work to speak out against the buying up of veterinary clinics by venture capital and by some really big corporations, including Mars. I also noted that Mars owns a lot of these small pet food brands that seem very diversified. As you said, they seem like different brands with different aspects to them, but they're many of them owned by Mars. There's also a narrative that I want to dig into, maybe separately from this, with you as well, certainly, in a kind of better pet food movement that a lot of these highly processed pet foods are really bad for pets. They're causing lots of different diseases and affecting longevity and things like that. Would it be too conspiratorial to suggest that this is like a vertical integration of this market that serves Mars? "If we serve pets food that makes them sick, let's also then buy up the veterinary clinic so we can profit off of the visits that they will need to have because of their poor diets."

Marion Nestle:

It's like the GLP-1 drugs. Think of it that way. It's exactly the same thing. You're a company that is producing a product that makes people sick, and then you produce the drug that fixes it. Yeah, that's how capitalism works. I have a lot of sympathy for the people who are really concerned about the quality of pet food, and the way they put it is, "You, Marion Nestle, would never suggest that people eat ultra-processed foods."

But commercial pet foods are ultra-processed. No question about it. What is the biggest health problem in dogs and cats? It's obesity. It's overfeeding. So it's very hard to separate the effects of pet obesity,

which are legion just all over the place. Some extraordinary percentage of dogs and cats, way more than dogs and cats did 30 years ago. It's just the same as with people. And once you have obesity established in an animal, you have the same problems that you do with obesity established in people.

Some of them are going to get really sick, and some of them aren't, but it's very hard to sort all that out. One of the impetuses for writing a book about pet food was I couldn't read the labels. I just couldn't understand the labels on pet food. But my partner, who was trained in animal nutrition, said, "Oh, these are feed labels. These are the kinds of labels that go on animal feed. He understood them completely," and now there's a big push to put a pet food fats label on pet foods and try to make the labels much more like the labels that are on human foods.

I think that's a very good idea. Your pet cannot advocate for itself. So if you want pet food that's really going to be healthy for pets, you want the pet food companies to be making healthy pet food and complain... and you want to complain like mad if they're not. So that requires advocacy. It requires joining groups. So I'm always in favor of complaining. If you don't complain, nothing will happen.

Susan Thixton:

Pet food killed my dog. It was a long time ago. It was 30 years. I used to be a dog obedience trainer and ran a dog and cat boarding facility and my dog, who was my business partner, my best friend, she got a lump on her pelvic bone almost overnight took her to my trusted veterinarian, who knew more about pet food back then 30 years ago than most vets do today.

He said it was bone cancer. And I had about two weeks to tell her goodbye, and I was horrified. And I'm going, "What? Bone cancer? How did this happen?" And he said, "Well, it was probably caused by a chemical preservative that they added to the pet food to extend the shelf life." That chemical preservative is called ethoxyquin. It is still used in pet food now.

And he said it was to extend the shelf life. Well, I didn't really even know at the time understand what shelf life was, and this was pre the internet, so I called the pet food manufacturer and said the only thing I was brave enough to ask him was, "How long will your pet food stay fresh?" And they very proudly told me the pet food would stay fresh for 25 years. And those words, plus the death of my dog, it changed my life.

Jerusha Klemperer:

This is Susan Thixton, a pet food consumer advocate who runs the website TruthaboutPetFood.com, which seeks to educate consumers about what's actually in their pet food.

Susan Thixton:

I have meetings with the FDA, and I take the regulations and try to simplify them to explain to pet owners. It empowers them to muddle through all the smoke and mirrors of pet food, and hopefully, they can select a product that is better for their pet. I started Truth About Pet Food in 2006, right before the 2007 pet food recalls, horrible recalls. Because, I think, of that recall, pet owners started following my site, and they are who urged me to start going to the regulatory meetings, being the consumer voice there.

So I went to my first regulatory meeting, and the regulations aspect of it just really resonated with me. And that person on the highway that's driving the speed limit, so if everybody wants to know who that person is, it's me. So rules mean something to me, and the pet food regulation side of it really resonated, and it was all hidden. You pay to attend these regulatory meetings. You have to buy the book that the

regulations are all in. So I got involved in that and slowly started explaining all of this, breaking it down and explaining it to pet owners.

Pet food is regulated on both a federal level and a state level, and both federal and state authorities allow pet food to violate state and federal law with no warning or disclosure to the consumer. And when you want the FDA to do something different than how they're regulating a product, you file a citizen petition, and they're required to respond within a certain timeframe. I filed multiple with FDA on these illegal ingredients and non-disclosure to consumers. I have another one in with the agency now that we've been waiting on for more than two years for a response, and they're supposed to respond, I believe it's within 120 days.

I do things like that for consumers. The website is TruthaboutPetFood.com. No "the" in front of it. In fact, an industry, I don't know if they still own it, but an industry freight organization bought the domain name thetruthaboutpetfood.com, and they bought truthaboutpetfood.net and they directed it to their industry website, which did not make me very happy. TruthaboutPetFood.com, I share everything. When I learn something new, I share it on the website. I have a newsletter that's free for pet owners to sign up for and I am 100% consumer-supported. I have products that help pet owners get through finding a quality pet food.

I do all the homework for them, and I take no money from industry. I don't even allow them to buy me lunch, nothing whatsoever. 100% consumer-supported. When I started doing advocacy work, I was going to go in and be the squeaky wheel, and we were going to get changes. Each citizen petition. My whole heart was put into this, and it's right and just and we're going to see changes. Well, after a few years and a few more gray hairs, you realize that they just keep shooting us down, but I have remained squeaky no matter how many years have gone by. So they don't like me very much at all, and I take that as a compliment that I'm doing my job right.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Who is hosting these regulatory meetings and who is attending a regulatory meeting? What's the purpose of them? Because that sounds like, "Wow, that's a lot of oversight." But what I understand from the reading I've done and from especially your reading is there isn't the kind of oversight that's needed. So what are these meetings?

Susan Thixton:

The meetings are held by the Association of Animal Feed Control Officials, emphasis on the word feed. Just to get a little sidetracked here, is that pet food, the majority of pet foods are not food. They are feed. Feed is a different monster. Feed does not have to abide by food regulations. The quality of ingredients do not have to meet the same quality that is in food, human foods. Their feed. Federal law says that animal feed would not be feed. It should be food. As an example, the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act defines food as anything consumed by humans or animals. It defines an adulterated food as any food that contains a diseased animal or an animal that has died other than best slaughter.

If you remember as an example of what an animal that has died other than best slaughter is. In 2017, Hurricane Florence hit North and South Carolina very heavy, caused a lot of flooding. There's a lot of factory farms, confinement farms for poultry and hogs in this area, and these animals drowned. I think more than 5 million poultry and something like 300,000 hogs drowned in their confinement barns. Well, when the floodwaters subsided, those bloated, decomposing carcasses were bulldozed out, taken to

what is called a rendering facility. Those carcasses were ground, hooked, and then sold to pet food with no disclosure to the consumer. That material also goes back into livestock feed.

It's a serious violation, and it's a direct violation of what federal law says. The FDA in those citizen petitions, previous ones that I've sent to the FDA, and this is... I'll try my best to do a direct quote, the FDA's response was, "We do not believe that the use of diseased animals or animals that have died other than by slaughter in animal food poses any concern. So we are going to continue to allow it through enforcement discretion." Yet when we go, "Okay, then at least label these products for the consumer," because who would intentionally... If a dog food or cat food was labeled with "made with diseased chickens," who's going to buy that?

Jerusha Klemperer:

And just to be clear, the potential harmful effects of this beyond the ick factor, which is quite high, what are the potential harms there beyond the, ugh, seems wrong at a gut level?

Susan Thixton:

Well, it is wrong because it's a violation of law and it's highly inferior nutrition. But if this wasn't, if this was acceptable, "Just cook it. It'll be okay," if that was truly acceptable, that would be allowed into human food.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Something I've talked about with other guests is around this interplay of the human food system and the pet food system and how, in the best-case scenario, when it's maybe working right, there's a kind of positive upcycling that's happening, right?

Susan Thixton:

Anything that is USDA inspected and passed, like internal organs, liver, as example, that's wonderful. And if that animal had to die for food, let's use as much of that chicken feed they give to dogs, use that part of the animal that humans don't typically consume, but it has to be from a healthy animal, and the problem pet owners face, there's no disclosure on that label.

It can say byproducts. People are leery of the word byproducts. It's not necessarily a bad word. It's not necessarily an inferior ingredient, especially if it comes from a USDA-inspected and passed animal. But that and passed, that's the important two words there and passed.

Jerusha Klemperer:

And part of that I know from reading about the melamine recalls is that a lot of times, there's so many different ingredients coming from so many different places that part of the issue is, yes, the companies are not being transparent with the consumers, but part of it is that it seems like they don't even know what's in some of this stuff, right?

Susan Thixton:

And nobody validates anything. Nobody validates anything. To me, that's a sign of a good manufacturer is if they test, you would think that, randomly, the FDA or state authorities would test this pet food for common chemicals that shouldn't be in there.

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One that should be tested for is called pentobarbital. Pentobarbital is the drug used to euthanize animals. And there have been more than 91 million pounds of pet food over a two-year, three-year span that was recalled because it contained some type of a euthanized animal in it.

Jerusha Klemperer:

People care a lot about how food impacts their pet's health and quality of life, but what about the health and quality of life of the animals who are raised to be killed for food, our food, and our pet's food? It stands to reason that if you're an animal lover who would let a cat or dog sleep in your bed or stand on your dining room table or who would cook a meal from scratch for your fussy pet's enjoyment, you would care about those animals too.

Daisy Freund:

We have run surveys of the public and found that pet owners care deeply about how farm animals are treated at higher levels than non-pet owners. My name is Daisy Freund. I'm the vice president of Farm Animal Welfare for the ASPCA, and our program focuses on ending factory farming and building a more humane food system, and that includes helping consumers and companies and lawmakers make choices that will improve farmed animals lives, whether they're buying or working on human food or pet food.

So a 2023 national survey found that 87% of pet food shoppers would switch to another brand of pet food if they knew that the brand sourced more humane ingredients. The vast majority of people report being willing to pay for more higher-welfare pet food. So there's not as much of a divide in people's concern as the market might show. Even with all those statistics, the reality is most people don't know how farm animals are raised, so they don't even know that they're buying something that deeply violates their intrinsic concern for animals.

Most of our society is removed from farming practices by no accident. There's decades of marketing that's distanced the product from the animal, and then all these misleading words that lull us into the sense that animals are still raised on grass and small bucolic farms, and 90% of them are raised in filthy crowded warehouses. But people who have pets who love their companion animals are uniquely well-positioned to break through all that apathy and the distance that has allowed the cruelty of factory farming to continue.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Let's talk about this distinction that we make as a culture between farmed animals and companion animals because this issue is where these two subsets of animals really come into juxtaposition, and I'd love to talk about the nomenclature that animal welfare advocates use these terms very specifically and then also get into what these two categories of animals are.

Daisy Freund:

So farm animals, that term is distant. It's objective. It sort of speaks to these animals' identity as if they're inherently meant to be raised on farms for food, whereas a term like farmed animals speaks to the fact that they are being farmed while not implying that this is who they are. So that's why you often hear animal welfare groups refer to them as such, as farmed animals. But any sanctuary and, importantly, any high welfare farm that the ASPCA works with will tell you that pigs and chickens, cows, goats, they all have unique personalities, and if they have a chance to build trust with humans, they are playful, loyal, they're loving just like dogs and cats.

In particular, I'm thinking about a farm near my house that uses dogs as guardians on their farm, and the farmer would be the first to say and has said to me that there are endless similarities between those dogs and the pigs that she raises. But historically, we have raised some animals for food, and we've kept others in our homes, and these are just roles that we've assigned to these animals if we're being honest. All of them are sentient. They're able to suffer and experience joy, and acknowledging that brings up these ethical tensions that, unfortunately, in my opinion, can make people tune out and ignore farm animal welfare because it's just too painful.

I wish that weren't true. We're trying to change that. I think acknowledging these animals individuality and the similarities to the animals who we love and care for in our homes can be fuel for us to shift our food system to respect animals welfare and their needs to shop and advocate for higher standards on farms and insist on a more humane food system because we know that these animals deserve good lives. There's 163 million or so dogs and cats owned as pets in this country, and you can imagine if all those people extended the compassion that they have for dogs and cats to farm animals, which is not a stretch, they can use their market power to drive change in myriad ways.

That's really taking the issue of farm animal welfare, which is sometimes seen as a sort of fringe or radical issue to care about and mainstreaming it just as having companion animals and loving them has really been mainstreamed. So that is one of the core reasons why the ASPCA chose to launch our Higher-Welfare Pet Food Initiative because we could recognize that we reach millions of pet lovers who are all buying food for their animals, and that food influences the lives of billions of other animals. And we want to make sure they understand the connection and feel empowered to make food choices for their pets and then their own diets that reflect their values.

Jerusha Klemperer:

And so, tell me a little bit about how this initiative works and what that means to be a higher-welfare product.

Daisy Freund:

So like most of the meat, eggs, and dairy consumed by people, almost all pet food today is made from animals who spent their lives confined and inhumane conditions on what we call factory farms. And if U.S. pets made up their own country, they would rank fifth in the world in meat consumption, which is a staggering statistic. 25 to 30% of meat produced in the U.S. is used in food for dogs and cats.

So that means changing pet food will change animal agriculture. And recognizing that and our unique connection to pet lovers, the ASPCA Farm Animal Welfare program launched our Higher-Welfare Pet Food Initiative as part of our broader consumer platform that we call Shop With Your Heart. It's a suite of free resources, everything from a label guide, all the food claims that impact animal welfare or don't.

Also, a list of welfare-certified farms across the country and a list of welfare-certified food brands available in major supermarkets. And the grocery list is that list of food brands. It's the most accessible higher-welfare products. We see pet food as a stepping stone. It's a gateway. In some ways, it's easier to focus on and switch your dog or cat's food than your own food because it's one decision that you set, and you largely stop thinking about it. It's one brand that you buy routinely. You have it shipped to you.

And once people make the connection between food products and animals, it can spill over into the food they're buying for themselves and their families. And since launching the Higher-Welfare Pet Food Initiative, many pet food companies are now working with the ASPCA. The way it works is that interested

companies discuss with the ASPCA, learn about farm animal welfare issues, and then work with us to make a meaningful commitment to higher-welfare standards.

So at a baseline, eliminating cages and crates, intensive crowding, adopting better breeds if they're using chicken products, ideally moving outdoor pasture-based standards for animals. And we push these companies to earn a welfare certification that we recommend. There's three that we consider at least a baseline of standards that we believe farm animals deserve. So that's a global animal partnership level two and above, certified humane, and animal welfare approved as the standard we recommend most highly, which is fully pasture-based.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Do they have a farm that is their farm where the animals are being raised, and they are overseeing these standards? Or is it that you're having them purchase product from farms who meet those certifications, but it's not vertically integrated or whatever?

Daisy Freund:

Yes, pet food companies are not vertically integrated. Nobody has their own farm raising animals, which is then becoming exclusively pet food. And that is another reason why this is such a linchpin issue in changing the food system because the pet food sector plays a really unique part in farmers' bottom lines. Right now, the vast majority of the pet food sector is buying leftovers from the lowest welfare farms. So that means certain parts of the animal are going into the human food system.

And then anything that isn't popular or preferred for human food or possible to be made into human food, which is left on the carcass, is... it goes into the pet food stream in some way or another or the animal feed production stream. So that means that pet food is really adding an income stream to factory farming as a model right now. It's kind of taking care of the leftovers and, in some cases, the waste that we'd have no other purpose for.

But if we shift that demand if pet food brands increasingly require higher-welfare standards, then they become a source of income, a secondary source of income for higher-welfare farmers who are largely supplying the higher-welfare human food market, but who we know are struggling enormously to compete. So that would ultimately bring down the cost of higher-welfare meat, eggs, and dairy for people too.

If we can get that what is either considered a waste product or what needs to be sold into the conventional market actually get those farmers a higher price point for it, that better represents the amount of energy and resources that went into raising an animal with more space, better environments on pasture, et cetera. One of the major problems both in human food and pet food is that there's a whole set of people who are motivated, have a little bit of extra money to spend, and that market signal is getting drowned out because of misleading labels.

So the problem is just as bad on pet food as it is on meat and eggs and dairy we buy where you see a package that has green grass and chickens roaming and natural and hand-fed and gently raised, and God knows what other claims, and they are doing nothing to ensure that animals are raised more humanely. That's why we offer a label guide, which applies to both pet food and human food, to help people not get misled by those claims and take their money for no good reason.

Jerusha Klemperer:

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I decided to talk to one of the companies in ASPCA's Higher-Welfare Pet Food Initiative to learn about how what they're doing differs from what most mainstream pet food companies are doing.

Jacqueline Prehogan:

I'm Jacqueline Prehogan. I am a co-founder and chief brand officer at Open Farm, and in that role, I oversee all of our mission programs, so everything to do with animal welfare, sustainability, transparency, and really how those come to life. I grew up eating meat a lot, never really thinking much about it, and at some point, I think that we just started to connect the way that animals are raised with the meat that we're eating, really asking the questions of where our meat and our ingredients are coming from.

This was very much a trend that was emerging in around 2013, 2014 when we started. But I think it was definitely sort of the right time where other pet parents were really starting to ask those same questions about food for themselves and really seek that out for their pets, better source ingredients, knowing where ingredients came from higher standards. And so that's really where the concept of Open Farm came from.

It certainly started with the way that our meat was sourced and having the highest animal welfare standards, but then we realized it's everything that we put in the bag. It's our seafood and having a full sustainability program around that. It's the packaging that it comes in, and trying to do our best to make sure our bags are not ending up in landfill and we want to give as much information to pet parents about their pet food as possible. And so, really setting out to sort of reinvent transparency and information sharing in the pet food space.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Can you describe what's different about a product that comes from a company that's focused on transparency from mainstream pet food?

Jacqueline Prehogan:

Sure. Well, I think the very first thing is it starts with control over your supply chain. I think a lot of times, companies don't have that level of control, and they may not really even know exactly where all their ingredients come from. And so by having that control over our supply chain, knowing where everything comes from, and then having... applying those extremely high standards as to where we actually source our ingredients from, we're able to share that information with our customers. So, if you pick up any of our products, there'll be a QR code.

You can scan the QR code, and you will see it's on a last-batch basis. So the last batch of that type of product. So, say it is salmon ancient grain kibble, where each and every ingredient came from. You'll see which certifications it has. You can even go deeper. You can then, on your specific bag, you can type in the lock code in our site, and then you can see that particular lot of product. You can see the safety testing report. You can see the exact details of that bag.

Jerusha Klemperer:

When we were scheduling, you mentioned, "Oh, I can't do that, or I'm blah blah, blah because I'm going to Australia. I'm going to visit one of our farms or some of our farms."

Jacqueline Prehogan:

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I am so happy that you asked me about my trip to Australia. Also, we went to New Zealand, and I'm still on a high from the trip. It was incredible. So 100% of our meat has animal welfare certifications, either certified humane or global animal partnership. We always strive to go above and beyond even those certifications to find the best farms that are really at the cutting edge of animal welfare and the way that they're raising their animals. We visited the farms where we get our beef, lamb, and venison from.

And these are all... And our standards for those are pasture, so the animals need to be on pasture their entire lives. We do not source any meat from animals that have ever been on a feedlot. And so we're going to visit these farms. First of all, they're beautiful. They're wide open spaces. Just seeing them is beautiful. They're relaxing. They're with their babies. They're feeding them outside. They're doing what these animals should be doing, what comes naturally to them, and it was just amazing to see that. The other thing is the farmers. They are so passionate about what they do.

They understand the value in raising animals this way, and this is what they want to be doing. They feel so proud of the way they're raising their animals, but it's also good for their business. And when you go to farms like this in Australia and even more so New Zealand, they don't call it regenerative agriculture. Yes, sure. They have their certifications for it and all that, but they just call it good farming because it just makes sense. I saw the animals, I saw the calves, I saw the adult cows.

I went into the processing plants and saw everything, and then I ate the meat after. And to me, it was really important for me to do that full circle because that is what we're doing for our customers. It's exactly that. Most of our suppliers where we get our beef, lamb, and venison are in Australia and New Zealand, and we do have some in the U.S. It's because of, yeah, for sure, just the way that they raise their animals there. We've been able to find just absolutely incredible farm partners there that we want to work with.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I asked Jacqueline to address the environmental footprint of all that shipping and explain how a U.S. company focused on sustainability ended up choosing to source meat from so far away.

Jacqueline Prehogan:

So, in 2020, we did our baseline greenhouse gas emission inventory, and ever since then, we do our annual GHG emissions, and we are one of the few companies that we actually do it on a product level. So if you go on our website and you use that QR code that I mentioned, or if you go on just the product pages, you'll be able to see the greenhouse gas emissions of each and every product. What we're trying to do is give pet parents the information to say, "This product has a lower carbon footprint. This product has a higher carbon footprint." And just essentially giving them the information if that's something that's a priority for them that they know and they can decide.

Whenever we're making farm decisions, there's so many different factors that come in. Definitely the animal welfare standards are extremely important. Regenerative ag practices. I think our ability to source such incredible meat with such regenerative ag in Australia and New Zealand is a big factor. And when we look at beef, that it could be from anywhere, but say you look at beef from North America that's closer to home where there's the animal's spending, say, at least a third of their life on a feedlot, there's obviously a major environmental impact there too. Obviously, the feed that's grown, the environmental impact of that. And, of course, just feedlots really not being very good from a greenhouse gas emissions perspective.

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Whereas one of the amazing things about regenerative ag is, of course, the reabsorption of carbon into the soil. And so we basically kind of do that calculation, not... That's not the exact calculation of a cow from here and a cow from there, but the overall calculation of all the factors that go into those farms and why they make sense for us and why we're so supportive of the practices there. And Net-net makes sense for us to source a lot there and support those farmers. But there's also a lot of amazing farms in North America, and where we source our chicken, our turkey, our pork, and, for sure, a decent proportion of our beef as well.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I have to assume that part of it is cost. Cost for the company — that you guys are, I assume, accepting a smaller market share or a slimmer profit margin than, say, Mars — and also cost for the pet parent, right?

Jacqueline Prehogan:

From day one, when we started our company, we created our whole cost model and our ingredient model, and we knew absolutely we pay more for our ingredients, but we built our business knowing that and sort of factoring in. And honestly, that definitely makes us have to be a lot more efficient with our overhead and all the other areas of the business to make sure that we can offer a product. And we do aim to offer a range of products with a lot of different price points to still make our product accessible to pet parents. And because we already... We call them attributes.

Because our meats, and specifically our beef lamb venison, already have these attributes, which are pasture-based, the animal welfare certifications, it's a much smaller leap for us to be incorporating regenerative ag. So for us, that means a lot of it is like a lot of our farms already doing a bunch of it, but it's working with them to either get certified because there are certain certifications for regenerative agriculture that we're looking for.

And I think the reality is that today, meat that is raised on farms that have regenerative practices likely is more expensive, for sure, than conventional, but the goal is to get it within a range that ultimately can become more widespread, more mass, and consumers can have more access to this. And it just becomes, again, good farming for just... but for more and more and more farms and more places in the world. We pay a premium for all the parts that we buy.

Whereas if they weren't selling it to us, if they weren't selling, say, the meat on that bone, they would have to sell it to say into conventional for chicken soup or something for people. And they're not going to be paid a premium on that because they're not... that chicken soup is not going to have that animal welfare certification. But we'll pay often more than twice as much for those cuts of meat, and that way, the farmer is getting a return on their better farming practices for the entire animal.

Jerusha Klemperer:

For people who really care about animal welfare, choosing a pet food with humane certifications and good practices is a very good option. For the many vegans and vegetarians who have pets, thorny questions can arise about what to feed them.

Jacqueline Prehogan:

The idea of animals being raised for food, I was a vegetarian for a really long time, but I think where my philosophy landed, and I think there's lots of different views on this that all have a place, but mine is that

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companion animals do thrive with meat in their diet and there's going to be pet food made with meat in it. And if we can make a pet food that is really focused on the farm animals in our supply chain and having the highest standards in animal welfare, that's really what we're trying to do.

Marion Nestle:

There's a chapter in the book "Feed Your Pet Right" about vegetarian and vegan diets. People swear by them. And you certainly can do that. You have to be really careful. You have to make sure your pet's getting enough calories and getting enough of the right kinds of the vitamins and minerals that might be missing. And there's a big argument that cats are obligate carnivores and they were evolved to eat meat. I mean, dogs will eat anything, but there're people... people feed their pets what they eat.

My favorite chapter in the book is about kosher pet food. You keep kosher, but your pet does not have to. So, therefore, what do you do? It's a very Talmudic chapter. I was very amused by it. I quoted a lot of rabbis on the subject of weather... of what you should... if you keep kosher what you should feed your pet. So people want their pets to eat what they're eating. If they're eating whole foods, if they're drinking acai smoothies, if they're whatever, whatever their particular food issue is, they're giving it to their pets too. And fortunately, the pets survive.

Jerusha Klemperer:

In order to understand this thought process that vegans or vegetarians might go through to decide what to feed their pets. I spoke to Matt Halteman, a vegan philosophy professor who specializes in animal ethics and has a book out called "Hungry Beautiful Animals".

Jerusha Klemperer:

Can we talk about vegans feeding their animals meat and sort of what you see as the ethical crux there and maybe what your journey has been as someone who thinks so deeply about these issues and then also has companion animals?

Matt Halteman:

Such a good and complicated question. How could somebody who loves animals never give any thought to the fact that, "Oh, I'm going to serve the very same processed nugget for every f*cking meal for 12 or 13 or 15 years without ever giving any thought to how boring and sad and..." Right. We know that animals have rituals around food. And so that right there, you see the human supremacy piece built right into the fact that we give no thought at all to serving the most unappetizing food that we would never consider. We rarely get around to the question of what we feed ourselves.

So it's not mysterious that we wouldn't put much thought into what we feed the huggable furniture in our house, which is how a lot of people treat their companion animals, unfortunately. What do I do? So we've had a strange journey here because we started with a bulldog, which we had no idea how awful the selective breeding practices were. And so finding the right food was another thing that became tricky for us because it's incredibly expensive. The only food that's good for the skin, supposedly on the basis of what we know is like 125 bucks a bag instead of \$30 a bag or something like this.

So there's all this complex stuff. Like with human supremacy, for instance, most of us are inclined to think, "Well, human beings deserve medical care, but if a dog requires a \$6,000 surgery, we should euthanize them and send the \$6,000 to Peter Singer's The Life You Can Save project" or something like

that. I mean... So it's very, very tricky when we start to think about special food for the dog or special medical care for the dog because there's all these assumptions built into the so-called pet-owner relationship, and that's one of the reasons I always cross out "owner" at the vet and write "guardian," right.

Because, ideally, at least this is a sentient free-living creature who happens to live with me, right. Now, we do feed our dogs kibble, but we feed them kibble and then fresh, whole-food snacks. Carrots, we had... we should have invested in carrots at one point for the amount of carrots that Gus was eating. Six pounds a week or so. Carrots, blueberries, sweet potatoes, brown rice sometimes. And so we make sure that their main nutritional needs are met by Royal Canin Vegetarian, which is a vegan dog food that I'm not going to lie, is costly.

It costs more money than a Purina or something like this. And then when our dogs experience medical conditions, we often have to pivot to foods that do include meat products. Philosophically, I guess my view is very similar to the one that I try to articulate in "Hungry Beautiful Animals" that it's not a one-size-fits-all. We know ourselves. We look at our talents and gifts. We look at our financial situations, and then we think of some stretch goals or the vision, right. And it's different for every person.

Alicia Kennedy:

My name is Alicia Kennedy. I'm the author of "No Meat Required: The Cultural History and Culinary Future of Plant-Based Eating." My dog is named Benny, and he is a Sato, which is a term for a Puerto Rican street dog. He comes from Mayagüez, which is in the west, and he was found under a car with a broken leg by a rescue organization called OBRA Rescue, and he was very young.

He was about two or three months when he was rescued, and we got him not long after that. My now husband gave him to me as a way of asking me to stay in Puerto Rico, but luckily when the dog was that small, I could have left with the dog. And the fact that I did not leave with the dog meant something. I always do say to my husband that I always wanted a dog, but I never necessarily wanted a husband. Benny is a very, very hungry dog and I cannot really control what he eats because I can control what he eats in terms of kibble.

We also give him a local chicken egg every day. Every morning when he comes home from that walk, he wants his raw chicken egg and he wants it over some of his kibble, which we call kibble tartar, and he... but he also gets treats everywhere around town. He goes on little, we call it, he's collecting the treat taxes, and he goes to different bars and shops around Old San Juan and gets treats in those places. Some of these treats are treats that I would not give him. For the bar that he goes to every day, we buy his treats at Costco, it's like 100% supposedly human-grade chicken, and that's the only ingredient along with the vegetable glycerin that keeps it together. And I'm comfortable giving him that because I do know as a dog, he just has different needs and he also has frankly different desires than I do, and I can't really force upon him. He also eats a lot of bones off the street that I can't control. He'd be very happy to find a burger on the street. He's eaten half a cheeseburger off the street. And I've talked to other people about this before.

I've talked to other vegans with dogs before about what they feed their pets, and even the most committed ethical vegans will feed their dogs meat I've found out because they simply want... not eating meat is partly because we don't want to impose our will on animals, and when we see how our dogs react to food that has animal products in it versus food that doesn't, there's a clear hunger and satiation level that they demonstrate, and it's just something I wouldn't want to interfere with in terms of the natural order of things.

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Jerusha Klemperer:

Was this all something that came naturally to you when you became a dog owner when you had a strong perspective and point of view on how you eat?

Alicia Kennedy:

I wanted to feed him vegan food 100%. I wanted to buy the vegan food that I saw online that I saw other people using, but I couldn't get it here in Puerto Rico readily. And the fact is he's a dog. He's different from me. We're not making the same kinds of choices. I'm not eating bones off the street.

I'm not tempted by that. He'll roll around in human feces. That's not what I do. That's not how I like to spend my time. So we just have different needs. We have different ways of being in the world, and so I just wanted to do something that would be best for him in terms of consistency and in terms of his nutrition.

Jerusha Klemperer:

And then, of course, there's cooking for your pet yourself, making food from scratch at home. I decided to give it a shot using that recipe that Marion Nestle mentioned from her book. It's got a bunch of things you might find in your own kitchen, meat, grains, fat vegetables, and then a few things you might have to leave the kitchen or your house for, like bone meal or an adult multivitamin. Okay. So this calls for four ounces of cooked meat. I didn't have any cooked meat just lying around, so I'm going to cook up some ground pork I had in my freezer.

Okay. Just finishing up the meat here. And definitely, all of the animals have circled around as you'd expect. The recipe calls also for animal fat or actually any kind of fat like vegetable oil or chicken fat or bacon fat. So I think I'm just not going to drain this meat and just save the fat that came off of the pork and use that in the recipe too. Okay, so the recipe calls for eight ounces of cooked grains. I've got some barley here. We'll see if my dog likes that. And then I'm going to put in four ounces of this pork that I just cooked up with the fat.

Actually, I might need to add a little extra oil to it. I'll use some vegetable oil or olive oil, and then I'm going to put in one ounce of cooked vegetables. I've got these string beans, these steamed string beans, and then a teaspoon of bone meal, which I did get a teaspoon of that from someone on my Buy Nothing group. And then a quarter teaspoon potassium chloride supplement and one adult daily multivitamin. And then I'm just going to combine them all in a bowl. You want to try this? Come here, try it. What do you think? It seems like he likes it.

Susan Thixton:

There are good companies out there. They're just not the easiest thing to find. I feed mine part commercial from companies that I trust — I've vetted them— and part homemade and homemade is literally the cheapest way, the most inexpensive way for a pet owner to feed a human-grade pet food. And it's not all that hard. You have to have a good recipe.

Marion Nestle:

I met a lot of people in the alternative pet food movement when I was working on this book, and they're wonderful people. They're just absolutely wonderful, and they really love their animals.

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And I don't want to argue with them about anything they're doing. But for your run-of-the-mill owner who just wants to feed a dog or a cat and not worry about it and not have to think about nutritional balance or cooking or any of those things, I think the commercial stuff works.

Susan Thixton:

When head owners first start cooking for their pets, I'll tell you now, it's scary as can be. You've set this food down, and you go, "Oh my gosh, am I going to kill my pet?" because we've been so programmed. You can only feed pet food.

Then, after you do it a few times, then you get more comfortable with it. But as long as they follow a good recipe, that's the best way. Exactly what's in there, you made it. My line is "my cooking's not killed anybody. And pet food can't say that."

Jerusha Klemperer:

What You're Eating is produced by Nathan Dalton and FoodPrint.org, which is a project of the Grace Foundation. Special thanks to Marion Nestle, Susan Thixton, Daisy Freund, Jacqueline Prehogan, Matt Halteman, and Alicia Kennedy. You can find us at www.foodprint.org, where we have this podcast, as well as articles, reports, a food label guide, and more.