

DO NOT TOUCH THE ANIMALS!

According to Colorado's PAUSE Act, ranchers and veterinarians are felony sex offenders.

By Marjorie Haun

Gosh darn it, who wouldn't want to "Protect Animals from Unnecessary Suffering and Exploitation"? That's the working title of a Colorado ballot initiative introduced earlier this year, and by golly, who could be against that? But given the fact that special interests are always trying to obliterate industries by abusing the ballot initiative process, I got past my fit of warm fuzzies and read the text of the "PAUSE Act." My immediate reaction was, "What sicko came up with this?"

The PAUSE Act would label every ranch-

er, veterinarian and pet and livestock breeder who uses proven and accepted practices in caring for animals as felony sex offenders. What kind of mind draws parallels between animal husbandry and rape? A deranged mind? An ignorant mind, certainly, but worse, a devious mind with designs to destroy meat production in Colorado forever.



COURTESY STETSY BUNDY COX

Vegan extremism was ushered in by Colorado's uber-progressive governor, Jared Polis, when he appointed Ellen Kessler to the State Board of Veterinary Medicine in 2019. An unabashed animal-rights militant, Kessler is inclined to cartoonish activism, with social media posts screaming that animal husbandry is "rape," and "meat is murder." Additionally, there is a vegan activist in the governor's mansion. Although Polis has said that the PAUSE Act would hurt Colorado's economy, its accomplices have likely been emboldened by his husband, vegan activist

Marlon Reis. Accounting for less than two percent of the population, vegan extremists are influencing Colorado's animal agriculture policy. Elections have consequences.

The PAUSE Act, also called "Prop. 16," extends existing animal-abuse statutes, such as those outlawing bestiality, to virtually all practices used in the breeding and reproduction of livestock and pets. Its title conceals the anti-agriculture reality of the proposal; nonetheless, the wording has been approved by the state title board. Various ag interests have appealed that approval to the Colorado

Supreme Court, which at this writing has not made a decision. If given the go-ahead, 125,000 signatures will be needed to get Prop. 16 on the 2022 ballot and its backers are hoping to make Colorado a successful test case for other states to follow. The primary authors of the act are Brent Johannes of Boulder and Alexander Sage of Broomfield. Johannes is affiliated with PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and supports the activities of Direct Action Everywhere, an organization known for carrying out terroristic raids on agricultural facilities. Sage is a software engineer who volunteers at an animal "sanctuary."

The "animal sanctuary" mindset of Prop. 16's architects could be to blame for its more bizarre stipulations, which include criminalizing the slaughter of an animal that has lived less than a quarter of its "natural life span." According to Prop. 16, cows live 20 years; pigs and sheep, 15; turkeys, 10; chickens, 8; and rabbits, 6. This may be true in sanctuary settings where animals are cared for like pets—at great expense and with countless volunteer man-hours—but no animal sanctuary ever produced a tittle of high-protein food. Do

Johannes and Sage realize that beef from a five-year-old steer is nigh unto inedible? Do they comprehend that the feeding, care and time put into a five-year-old bovine or a four-year-old pig or sheep would make raising them for market untenable?

Victim 1: The Animals

Even the hardest animals must be managed. Without animal husbandry, deficient and suffering livestock result. Prop. 16 would encode animal neglect into Colorado law. Terri Snyder-Lamers is a multigenerational sheep and cattle rancher who runs her herds near Norwood. "As ranchers," she says, "we are all very concerned about the well-being and humane treatment of our livestock. Prop. 16's title misrepresents the irreparable harm this ballot measure will cause. The exception for something as routine as assisting a ewe delivering a backwards lamb opens the door to animal cruelty charges. Left unassisted this poor sheep and her unborn lamb are going to suffer for days and eventually die. We can help her and deliver healthy lambs. What is wrong with that?"



COURTESY KATRINA LACA

ABOVE: Young Grace Laca helps a struggling ewe give birth to the second of three lambs. All lambs were born healthy and survived. TOP LEFT: Cattle rancher Clance Cox assists a newborn calf after "pulling" it during the birthing process.

The well-being of domestic animals is dependent on human interaction. Lora Bledsoe of Kit Carson County is a cattle rancher and veterinarian who runs a mobile large-animal veterinary service. Bledsoe further explains the potential for suffering: “When it is time to breed a heifer, producers generally choose the best quality bulls to produce a low-birth-weight calf and this is often done through the use of AI [artificial insemination]. Under Prop. 16 this would be banned, increasing the uncertainty of the heifer being able to have an easy calving. You would not be able to age the fetus so you would have no idea when to expect the arrival of the calf, increasing the likelihood that the heifer would have to deliver unassisted. All of these procedures which are banned by the proposition,” she warns, “increase the risk of the breeding cycle ending in complete failure and loss. In my mind, it is the act of outlawing currently available best medical practices that should be considered animal abuse.”

Prop. 16 would set pet care back a century.

Less than two percent of the population, vegan extremists, are influencing Colorado’s animal agriculture policy. Elections have consequences.

Pet longevity and quality of life are correlated with controlled reproduction. Considered the most humane methods of eliminating unwanted pets and feral populations, spaying and neutering would be criminalized.

Victim 2: The Veterinary Profession

Prop. 16 is written so broadly that it would criminalize all accepted practices related to animal breeding and pre- and postnatal care: artificial insemination, pregnancy checks on female livestock, fertility testing, semen collection, assistance with difficult births, gelding of colts, castration of bulls, and spaying and neutering of house pets. Not only would this profoundly harm livestock producers, but it would also make common veterinary practices illegal. Bledsoe warns: “This proposition would be very harmful to large-animal veterinary practices. In my own practice, 30 percent of my gross service income is derived from pregnancy checking and bull breeding sound-



PHOTO © DEVON BALET

ness exams, procedures that would both be outlawed under the proposition.”

Prop. 16 would outlaw industry practices that ensure healthy pregnancies and the overall well-being of animals. There exists now a critical shortage of rural large-animal vets in states such as Colorado where great distances separate towns and ranches. Banning basic livestock veterinary care would eliminate key sources of income, and given existing pressures already on rural vets, it’s unlikely they

ABOVE: Janie VanWinkle, Colorado Cattlemen’s Association president, pauses with her horse during a day of working cattle on her ranch in Mesa County. BELOW: Despite her extremist views that animal husbandry is “rape” and “meat is murder,” Gov. Jared Polis appointed vegan activist Ellen Kessler to the Colorado Board of Veterinary Medicine.

echoed through all my interviews with producers—“This will put us out of business.”

Stan Galley, a young cow/calf rancher from Nucla, says, “It doesn’t make sense that you would want to destroy the second biggest economic provider in the state.” Formerly a uranium boomtown, Nucla is now dependent on ranching and a smattering of tourism, so it all comes down to what it costs to raise an animal. Galley continues: “When it comes to banning preg checking, you have to ask yourself, ‘Why would you want to feed a cow that’s not going to produce anything for you?’ You can’t afford to feed cattle until they’re five years old, which is way past their prime for meat production. If anyone did hang on to their animals that long, all those animals would have to be shipped out of state to be slaughtered, then the meat shipped back in. The price of meat at the grocery store becomes astronomical. You make real meat so expensive that no one can afford it. I think it’s part of their plan to push the fake-meat agenda.”

Lars Naslund, whose family came to Colorado in 1904, runs a five-generation cattle ranch and hopes to see his children take up the business. Alarmed by Prop. 16, he opens



ELLEN KESSLER FACEBOOK POST

would survive by servicing a handful of hobby ranches and animal sanctuaries.

Victim 3: The Producers

Ranchers are probably the most unscripted people on earth, but the same sentiment

with: “We’d go broke. We have a yearling operation, and to think you’d have to wait until a quarter of their lives to breed or castrate, it just isn’t possible. Eating five-year-old beef is like eating your boot.” Naslund believes the livestock industry needs to do a better job with education. “We need to get it back into the schools that there’s a circle of life and we’re part of it. If we destroy the part of the cycle that produces food, we’ll destroy ourselves in the mix.”

Sara Bray, an elementary schoolteacher and ranch wife with roots in western Colorado, is raising her three children to be involved with the family cow/calf operation. “We believe Prop. 16’s wording about the life span of cattle is very subjective,” she says. “We have a lot of cattle and I’ve never seen a cow live to be 20 years old.” The Brays’ operation is successful in part because they AI their heifers. “We control the timing so calves aren’t born in the coldest months of the year when we could lose them. But if an animal does need help, we want to be able to help them without being charged criminally. Prop. 16 defines an act such as pulling a calf as felony sexual abuse of an animal.”

Well spoken and passionate, Bray is a member of the Colorado Farm Bureau and is taking her fight to a bigger audience. “We need to appeal to our urban allies for help. They may not understand husbandry practices, but they will understand how this affects their ability to care for pets.”

Victim 4: The Processors

Greeley’s JBS plant is Colorado’s largest meat-packing facility and 2020’s pandemic revealed just how fragile weak links in the supply chain



Countless family-owned packing facilities, such as A.T.’s Meatblock in Nucla, would be shut down if Prop. 16 becomes law.

can be. Dotty Burbridge, who owns A.T.’s Meatblock, an independent processing facility in southeastern Colorado, describes what happened when the big plants went offline: “We could barely handle it. People were bringing pigs and cows from as far as Snowmass, Loma and Durango for us to process.”

Prop. 16 would wipe out small operations such as hers, which provide a safeguard against bottlenecks in the supply chain. She says, “If the PAUSE Act goes through, I’ll have to close my doors.”

Burbridge worries about what will happen to aspiring ranchers. “What are the 4-H kids going to do? Those kids are raising their steers to sell to people who want to eat them. Most of the animals aren’t even 18 months old.”

Burbridge also makes the point that both science and the USDA repudiate Prop. 16’s nonsensical age provisions. “Although I don’t resell, I’m still inspected by a USDA inspector.

If there is a beef that is past two years old,” she says, “I can’t split it down the middle; I have to split it down the side to avoid touching the spinal cord.” Existing regulations discourage the slaughter of animals after the age of 30 months due to increased risk of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (Mad Cow Disease) in older animals. The regulations force processors to use more complicated and time-consuming methods in preparing older animals so that parts such as the spinal cord and brain don’t come into contact with meat and other organs. The USDA’s definition of an older animal is half that of Prop. 16’s.

Victim 5: The Landowners

With his sprawling ranch in rugged Garfield County, Kelly Couey looks beyond the immediate implications of Prop. 16, to what could be a grim future. “They’re trying to ruin an ecologically friendly industry. We basically harvest sunshine and grass and turn it into protein,” he declares. “If this PAUSE Act goes through, it’s going to make our ranches absolutely worthless. If we can’t run cattle, we can’t pay our taxes, so we can’t keep our property.”

Livestock are what give value to marginal agricultural lands unsuitable for crops such as corn or wheat. Couey’s point is that without a thriving meat industry, Colorado’s ranches and rangelands lose their productivity, and thus their monetary worth. He continues: “If they can put us out of business and other interests come in and buy up our lands, that means they get control of our senior water rights as well. You buy the land cheap and the water rights that go along with it...that’s a huge amount of money and control.”

COURTESY LORA BLEDSOE



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ABOVE: Rancher Stan Galley fears that Prop. 16 would put his family operation in western Colorado out of business. LEFT: Lora Bledsoe is a rancher from Kit Carson County who runs a mobile large animal veterinary service in eastern Colorado. Prop. 16 would set pet care back a century. Pet longevity and quality of life are correlated with controlled reproduction.

Couey's ranch is north of Aspen where vestigial ranches cling to the outskirts of billion-dollar neighborhoods filled with palatial homes. Couey suspects that Colorado's simmering urban/rural tensions may be pressurizing Prop. 16. "They look at us ranchers as being in their way. By using Prop. 16 to put us out of business," he conjectures, "they can get us off the land and make a lot of money doing it."

COURTESY AURELIE SIEGERS



With Lone Cone Mountain in the background, rancher Terri Snyder-Lamers helps move sheep near Norwood. Janie VanWinkle, president of Colorado Cattlemen's Assn., says, "We're meeting consumer demand while making sure that we have a safe, nutritious and affordable food supply. We will lose 170,000 jobs in Colorado if Prop. 16 passes."

The Fighters

Cattle rancher Janie VanWinkle of Mesa County is the president of the Colorado Cattlemen's Association. Her organization, along with pork producers, wool growers, egg producers and various farm bureaus and livestock associations, have formed Coloradans for Animal Care as a means to defeat Prop. 16. As Prop. 16's devotees want to make Colorado a test case for other states to follow, so its opponents want to create a model for successfully defeating similar initiatives. "Although we don't know exactly who is behind this, or who's funding it," she says, "it's no coincidence that Oregon has just introduced a proposition that is almost identical."

Of Colorado's 64 counties, the vast majority are agricultural and sparsely populated. VanWinkle's strategy is bottom up: "We're working with counties asking them to write resolutions opposing Prop. 16. Around 42 counties have already passed such resolutions, and legislators are speaking out against it." She continues: "Phil Weiser, the Democratic attorney general, has been very vocal about his opposition, and that is very helpful. We'll see what message resonates, especially with voters in the metro areas. There are seven urban counties that can quite easily beat the rest of the counties combined, so we have a lot of work to do."

At issue is the ag industry's ability to feed people. "Criminalizing the tools and processes that producers use to increase our efficiencies, minimize our carbon footprint and increase our sustainability makes no sense," VanWinkle contends. "We're meeting consumer demand while making sure that we have a safe, nutritious and affordable food supply."

She leaves this warning: "We will lose 170,000 jobs in Colorado if Prop. 16 passes. It will harm the most vulnerable socioeconomic groups, so we have to ask the question of those in favor of this initiative, 'Who will you be taking food from?'"

On its website, the recently organized Urban and Rural Allies for Colorado Agriculture makes the point that Prop. 16 will "increase food insecurity for all Coloradans, but especially for children in single-parent homes and the elderly due to the rise in food cost resulting from imported food products. Colorado already struggles with a state-average food insecurity rate of 9.9 percent (2018, pre-pandemic). To push for statutory law that would virtually eliminate Colorado agriculture, food costs would soar as the former Colorado-proud foods would have to be brought in from out of state.... As income levels in

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these rural areas drop, food insecurity will skyrocket."

A resident of the Front Range, Melody Michel formed the Urban Rural Allies group to bring the truth about Prop. 16 to millions who are removed from the ag lifestyle. Michel has connected with agriculture through farmers markets and her cattle-rancher boyfriend. In a *Fencepost* article by Rachel Gabel, Michel is quoted: "This wouldn't be as big of a threat if we had a better understanding of agriculture. I'm really tired of us as voters making decisions on these things that look pretty on the outside and then discovering that they're

garbage that hurt us, our children, and our future, and are totally misrepresented."

The implications of Prop. 16 are far-reaching and most have not been addressed by its authors. How it would be enforced, for example, is unclear. Would it fall under animal welfare and the authority of municipal animal control agencies, or would it be enforced criminally with the full power of police and sheriffs' departments? Would sheriffs in rural counties be willing to prosecute ranchers for animal husbandry practices that have been used for generations?

Notwithstanding, if recent events are an indication, Coloradans are prepared to stop the PAUSE Act in its tracks. Earlier this year, Gov. Polis proclaimed March 20 as Meat Out Day and suggested that everyone in Colorado abstain from eating meat. What followed was a pro-meat social-media tsunami, with countless politicians, ranchers, and ordinary citizens in Colorado and across the country extolling the virtues of animal protein and holding truly epic meat-ins attended by thousands. What Polis hoped would be a tribute to veganism turned into the most expansive barbeque in history.

That is the spirit that will save Colorado from Prop. 16. ■

Marjorie Haun is a freelance journalist and unwavering carnivore currently living in the wilds near the Colorado/Utah border.

NOTE: On June 21, 2021, after the original writing of this article, the Colorado Supreme Court rejected the title of the PAUSE Act, effectively killing it. The Court cited that it failed to meet the state's single-issue ballot requirement. Knowing with a near certainty that this radical and encompassing initiative will in the future reappear with another title, we at RANGE magazine hope this article will provide a roadmap to victory for Colorado and other states which will be confronted by extreme animal rights legislation. In the end, it was the people of Colorado who made the difference, bringing to light the dire consequences that would surely follow were this destructive anti-agriculture initiative to pass.