

Tara

The Story of One Sow



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On a hot day in June, CETFA inspectors discovered a sow in shocking condition at an auction in Ontario. The sow was emaciated – her spine, ribs, hips and even skull bones were clearly visible, yet her abdomen was enormous. It was clear she was suffering.

The inspectors provided her with water and spent time talking to her, calming her and scratching her face and chin. We named her Tara. While one of us kept an eye on her (as workers tend to load such injured animals while we're trying to advocate for them), the other went to ask to speak with the auction's veterinarian.

We were told by the office staff that the veterinarian had been in that morning but had not flagged the sow, and in fact, had never flagged pigs for further inspector or to be held back from the sales ring. This did not surprise us as we'd seen many injured sows at this auction before. In fact, an investigation conducted two years earlier showed that sows we marked to allow us to track them went from auction to auction over the course of a week, where they were given no food or water at any of the barns. The office staff did provide us with the name and phone number of the veterinarian though which was greatly appreciated.

We called the veterinarian and left a message. Fearing we would not get a call back, we contacted the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture who assured us they would send the veterinarian to re-examine the sow.

The veterinarian arrived and together we went to see Tara. The veterinarian had a portable ultrasound which he used to check if she was pregnant (as the workers were

claiming). No piglets were seen, but it became clear that she was suffering with severe ascites, which he attributed to congestive heart failure. Her liver was also enlarged indicating that she was in the final stages of heart failure. Although it seemed apparent that she was suffering (she could not lay down as it made breathing difficult but standing and walking was impeded, done gingerly and appeared painful), the veterinarian claimed she was not in pain and thus did not need to be euthanized. Incredulous, we continued to push for her euthanization. Eventually, the vet agreed to check with the buyer of the sow to see if he would be willing to sell her to us to be euthanized.

The veterinarian came back and happily announced that the buyer was the same as the seller. He claimed that he knew the man – a nice, old farmer – who assured the vet he would take the sow home, “put her down” and bury her that evening. This made no sense to us as anyone who would bring such a clearly suffering animal to auction is willing to do whatever necessary to make money off her and would most likely either leave her at the auction for the sale the following week or reload her to take to the next auction down the road.



Suspicious, we quietly stayed at the auction keeping an eye on Tara, making her as comfortable as possible. At the end of the day, when everyone but auction staff had left, the veterinarian returned to check cattle ID tags. We told him the sow was still at the auction but everyone had left. He told us the owner (the old farmer) was still at the auction and said he'd go talk to him. Realizing it was the only way to have her euthanized, we offered him cash to offer the owner. We discreetly followed the veterinarian as he went to the auction office where only the barn manager and office clerks were left. He and the barn manager came out, clearly unhappy, but willing to take the cash to euthanize Tara. It suddenly became obvious to us that the barn manager had bought and owned the sow, not a kindly old farmer as we'd been assured.



I wish I could say her euthanization was done humanely but rather than euthanizing her where she painfully stood (which is what is legally required), they pushed her with their knees out of the pen to the aisle where her dead body could more easily be dragged out with the bobcat. She very slowly and gingerly walked out of the pen. When I leaned down and called her for scratches she tried to pick up the pace but it was not fast enough for the men, who continually pushed her with their knees. I was then ordered to move out of the way so I didn't get hurt, yet it was clear Tara just needed comfort and was too sick to injure anyone. The cash was handed over and she was hit with the captive bolt pistol. While her rear leg kicked out, the barn manager kicked it back, over and over again with his foot. While I realized she was thankfully gone, the kicking seemed an aggressive act to further insult her. After, the manager angrily asked who I was, and demanded my card.

Back in the hotel room, I looked up Tara's condition feeling we should have tried to rescue her. What I found assuaged my guilt but further saddened us. Tara would've been in enormous pain, requiring a morphine IV. Chance of survival was 50/50 and would've required immediate emergency surgery and extensive treatment. Her condition was most likely preceded by weeks of malnourishment and/or starvation or TB (which is very common in pigs).

Learning of the pain she must've been in and realizing the vet must've known it, I became very angry.

And now, weeks after the event, I continue to be angry. I am angry that the producer who owned Tara let her deteriorate to the condition she was in. I am angry that the auction accepted her in such a condition. I am angry that the veterinarian saw her that morning and did nothing to help her. I am angry that with everyone at the auction that day, no one else spoke up for her. I am angry that the veterinarian who we called back to re-examine her, while diagnosing her with a painful condition, proceeded to leave her a second time. I am angry that it was up to me as a private citizen to pay for what should've been a given right to any suffering animal – freedom from that suffering. And finally, I am angry because I know that the next auction I attend will have another animal, suffering just like Tara but in a different form – a dairy cow, a veal calf, a spent laying hen – and no one within the system will advocate for them. It's as though I keep seeing the same suffering eyes looking back at me through different bodies.

- Twyla Francois



As Tara's story shows, farm animals desperately need us to advocate for them wherever they are. Because of this, CETFA has created a volunteer inspector program.

Volunteer inspectors can be anyone with an interest in helping farm animals – at auctions, at collecting stations and during transport – anywhere these animals are publicly accessible. Please see our website for the Volunteer Inspector's Checklist (www.cetfa.com) or contact us at care@cetfa.com.

Please, consider attending an auction when you can – you can provide much-needed water, attention, affection and advocacy for a suffering animal like Tara.



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