
Investigation Of The Ethics Of A Hamburger

“What’s more American than a cheeseburger?” highlights a common motif found throughout U.S. culture, where more than 50 billion hamburgers are eaten annually. In a culture dominated by ground beef and barbeque, it is no surprise that American diets are closely associated with the hamburger. But what many consumers may not realize are the ethical challenges of the burger production process. With meat, cheese, lettuce, pickles, condiments, and buns being only some of the ingredients, the hamburger supply chain becomes very extensive, and with this comes ethical dilemmas and responsibilities. By looking at the Ethical Life Cycle Assessment (ELCA) method, a four-step process “for determining business-specific responsibilities,” industries might better be able to address the ethical issues that come with producing the favored hamburger. The first step in the ELCA method is to identify the societal, environmental, global, and long-term issues and impacts that result from the product life cycle. The life cycle consists of sourcing, production, distribution, use, and disposal and helps to determine every possible impact that results from a product’s life cycle. For the sake of simplicity, only the main ingredient of a hamburger, the ground beef, will be examined. We will also examine the second step of the method, which is to ethically evaluate the impacts identified in step one by using the no harm principle. This ethical method states that you are allowed to make yourself better off without causing harm to anyone else.

The first process is known as sourcing, meaning getting all the materials needed to make the product. In this case, that means raising cattle. The implications of raising cattle are that they need land and food, and this is where the first issue comes up. Only so much land can be occupied on Earth, and according to Stanford University, “livestock occupies more than one-fourth of the Earth’s land,” and that number is slowly growing. Not only do the cattle need somewhere to live, but all the grain or grass that they need to feed off of needs to be grown somewhere as well. This is being accomplished through mass destruction of our global neighbor’s jungles and forests, resulting in “more than 111 million acres of deforested Amazon in Brazil” becoming cattle pastures, as well as pastures in Australia, Canada, and other parts of Latin America. This impact harms both the environment and the global growth of humanity because it is rapidly killing the forests that keep the CO₂ level down as well as eliminates land that could be used to house the growing population.

Similarly, the production of cattle brings similar issues. After getting cattle to the proper weight through grass diets or a diet consisting of grain, “candy, chicken coop waste, the slaughterhouse remains of pigs and chickens, and plastic pellets,” the cattle are brought to the slaughterhouse. After arrival, workers kill the cattle and prepare them for the market, but not without a few hiccups. Often, a slaughterhouse is very unsanitary, containing thousands of

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cattle whose hides and manure frequently transfer bacteria to the meat being processed. The unsanitary conditions also extend farther than the slaughterhouse, with the manure generating “hazardous air pollutants and... contaminants that can endanger human health. Neighbors as well as workers often suffer intensely from overwhelming odors and related headaches, nausea, and other long-term health effects”. The societal impact of the slaughterhouse operation harms both the factory workers and the neighboring residents, creating an inhumane and potentially harmful living situation.

Next in the cycle comes the distribution of the meat to the processing plants and then to their final destinations in grocery stores and restaurants. Since burgers are traditionally made in restaurants, we will focus on the restaurant’s distribution of their burgers to customers. The issues in this step fall under the meat’s tendency to have harmful bacteria due to the unsanitary production process, resulting in issues when cooking and preparing the meat properly for consumption. Employees in restaurants and fast-food chains prepare, cook, and distribute the food at high volumes. Due to the high demand, burgers are often made improperly. Cross-contamination occurs when utensils used to prepare the uncooked meat are then used to cook the meat, creating an environment where bacteria are never cooked off properly. Furthermore, many people determine doneness “by its internal color despite advice from food safety authorities on using thermometers to measure the core temperature”. This process harms the restaurant’s customers, which can have short-term and long-term effects. Salmonella and E. coli outbreaks caused by contaminated and uncooked ground beef have resulted in hospitalizations and death in the past, and will most likely have the same impacts in future outbreaks.

Once the hamburger is distributed to the consumer, it enters the use phase of the product life cycle where customers consume them. The issue in this step comes with the health impacts of eating the hamburger. A typical burger contains ground beef and a bun, with cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, and condiments, amongst other toppings. Because of this, “burgers can be high-calorie foods” due to their high levels of dietary cholesterol, saturated fats, and sodium, which leads to “high blood pressure and an increased risk for heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease”. If the consumer eats too many without considering the nutritional value, burgers can potentially harm their long-term well-being, creating an unhealthy and obese society. Finally, the last step in the production life cycle is the disposal of a hamburger. The main sources of waste result from the cooking and consumption processes. According to Greener Ideal, a website for green living tips, “whenever meat is grilled, fats and oils will be released from the meat as a natural by-product”. With over 50 billion burgers produced in a year, this creates a lot of grease that eventually must be disposed of, and if done so improperly can result in damaged pipes and contamination of the water supply. Also, most restaurants produce too many burgers, creating waste that must be thrown out. In 2011 alone, “133 billion pounds of food worth \$162 billion” had to be thrown out after not being consumed, wasting not only the meat but also the fuel and

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fertilizer that went into sourcing and processing the meat. This harms the environment more because the 'wasted' fertilizer and fuel did not go towards supporting the demands of society.

The third step of the ELCA method, now, determines how responsible the hamburger businesses are for the issues that were defined in steps one and two. In the issues defined above, the companies should hold equal responsibility. First of all, the businesses are a minor cause of deforestation and a major cause of undercooked meat. Their demand for ground beef led to huge expanses of land being cleared, whereas their lack of training caused undercooked meat to be served to customers. Similarly, the businesses most likely know that this is happening. Because Tyson, JBS, Cargill, BRF, and Vion have a 'monopoly' on the beef industry, it is fair to assume that most processed meat used comes from them. The businesses most definitely know what is happening within each of these companies, eliminating any possible unknowns. Finally, in determining responsibility based on power, one must look at either each business or the businesses as a whole. Separately fixing the issues raised by the product life cycle might be difficult, but if they come together and refuse meat from the industry leaders, then they could have the right amount of power needed to change the system. From this, we can conclude that businesses have equal responsibility in the economy to address the issues in the product life cycle.

The fourth and final step of the ELCA method asks us to identify strategies for the businesses to accept their responsibilities and take actions to address the issues identified. Within the life cycle of a hamburger, a lot of things could be fixed. The first would be to fix the global issue of sourcing the cattle. By raising cattle on smaller ranches closer to the sites that need the meat, rainforests and land in other countries could be preserved. This would reduce the amount of global deforestation, benefit local farmers and ranchers, and help defend against global outbreaks of E. coli or other harmful bacteria. Another issue to address would be educating employees on how to handle meat properly. Research has found that almost all packages of ground beef "contain bacteria that signifies fecal contamination which could cause blood or urinary tract infections", but this can be avoided by properly preparing and cooking the meat. By implementing an employee training program that teaches employees "about measuring the final temperature of ground beef using a thermometer and preventing cross-contamination by proper hand-washing and equipment cleaning," businesses could protect society from contaminated and undercooked meat and could save themselves from expensive lawsuits. Finally, every business could do a better job of not producing as much food waste. Food waste cannot be avoided, but it could be lessened. Businesses who cook less in anticipation of sales and donate their leftover food to local shelters or food banks could help build a tighter-knit community and develop a sense of care for all.

For many businesses, like Wendy's, these issues rise up every day. As a way to conform to the modern demands of society, companies have developed corporate social responsibility, "a

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management concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and interactions with their stakeholders". With this, companies are able to define their responsibilities and provide their stakeholders with evidence that they are doing more than just running a business. The three pillars of the model describe general societal, economic, and business-specific responsibility as being the main moral obligations that need to be upheld, and Wendy's specifies all of these.

For general societal responsibility, Wendy's is quick to comply with the rules and uphold citizenship by meeting their stakeholder's expectations. As stated in their Supply Chain report, "we believe it is our obligation to ensure that all of our suppliers exceed government regulations by meeting Wendy's more exacting standards pertaining to the humane treatment of animals," also making sure to get their auditors to approve of the methods being used. Similarly, Wendy's is sure to address current social norms, such as healthier meal options and knowledge about the production, by "[promising] to let our customers know exactly what's in our food and how we bring these menu items to our customers". This allows Wendy's customers to build confidence and a sense of commitment to their overall wellbeing, which can increase sales and grow the numbers of investors. Furthermore, Wendy's growing business success and sustainability efforts help achieve their economic responsibilities. By providing "beef that's never been frozen" and implementing new environmentally friendly buildings and equipment, Wendy's has effectively "lowered greenhouse gas emissions by more than 27 percent" and has become more attractive to investors which results in bigger investments and growing popularity amongst consumers. Finally, Wendy's dedication to business-specific responsibility is probably the most important aspect of their corporate responsibility. Wendy's is constantly looking to reduce their negative environmental, social, global, and future impacts, beginning with their animal welfare practices. Wendy's prides themselves as being "one of the first restaurant chains to establish animal care principles" and having done so by complying with Colorado State University's Dr. Temple Grandin's guidelines for the ethical treatment of beef and pork. By doing this, Wendy's is becoming an advocate for the ethical treatment of livestock, defining them as a positive force in the business world for their progressive standpoints.

Wendy's CR activities are definitely sufficient for the amount of power and responsibility that they have in the business world. According to the QSR 50 report that ranks the nation's fast-food companies, Wendy's was ranked number six in 2018. Behind McDonald's, Subway, and Burger King, Wendy's is definitely amongst one of the most influential companies in terms of production of a hamburger. With this comes the responsibility to make a positive impact on the world, as I believe they are already doing. Above, it was mentioned that to solve the global sourcing issues, companies should work towards sourcing their ground beef locally. For Wendy's, it has never been a question to not source local meats. Every report highlights that Wendy's has always sourced their beef "from North American farmers and ranchers who raise cattle specifically for high-quality beef grades". Their dedication to providing local meats

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properly addresses the global issues found in most other companies in the industry.

With that said, Wendy's, along with every other company, could be doing better to implement business activities that impact the world in a positive way. As a first suggestion, Wendy's should strive to implement a program to safeguard its customers from the potential harms that come from working with ground beef. Uncooked and cross-contamination is common in the food industry, often resulting in harmful and deadly E. coli and salmonella outbreaks. With their ability to easily control employee actions, it is in Wendy's best interest to properly train and enforce food safety. This can be done through employee training sessions that regularly teach proper food handling throughout employment and can be enhanced by investment in meat thermometers. In accomplishing this, Wendy's could completely eradicate the possibility of contaminated food. Capitalizing on a partnership between local food banks and shelters would similarly enhance Wendy's corporate responsibility. Donating and providing excess food to those who do not have the means to obtain it would not only enhance their business's economic responsibility of providing goods to the community but would also help further their philanthropy. While they do "recognize the importance of supporting local initiatives that help build a hunger-free community" on their Give Something Back web page, setting up a direct connection to the communities they inhabit would benefit them greatly. Providing warm meals at the end of their business day could help eliminate unnecessary food waste and local hunger and get Wendy's a step closer to becoming a positive force in the modern business world.

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