NjP *Journal of Business Ethics Education 23.*
© 2026 NeilsonJournals Publishing.
Promo 1st Version

Beef-on-Dairy Ethics: A California Dairy Operator's Dilemma

Steven Hyde and Shaunn Mattingly
Boise State University, USA

Abstract. Rachel Visser, a second-generation California dairy operator running a 2,800-cow farm near Hanford, discovered in March 2026 that the calves she had been selling to a regional calf nursery under a profitable buyback contract were housed in the facilities shown in a widely shared Vox investigation. The revenue from the contract had funded meaningful improvements on her own farm, including employee health insurance and a ventilation system that reduced heat stress mortality. Rachel now had four options. She could renew the contract, switch providers, build her own calf operation, or organize a cooperative with neighboring dairies. None was ethically or financially clean. Students confront how knowledge changes obligation, how supply chain responsibility extends beyond direct control, and how legal compliance and ethical defensibility can diverge when agricultural platforms evolve faster than their regulatory frameworks.

Keywords: business ethics, supply chain responsibility, stakeholder theory, moral distance, agricultural platforms, animal welfare, Proposition 12, dairy industry, decision making, tradeoffs.

Acknowledgement. Rachel Visser is a composite character representing experiences common among California dairy operators. All industry data, regulatory details, corporate actions, and market conditions reflect documented sources cited in the footnotes. The case has been prepared solely as a basis for class discussion and is not intended to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a business situation.

1. Introduction

The milking parlor at 4:30 in the morning was the only place Rachel Visser had ever been able to think clearly. The rhythmic pulse of the vacuum lines set a tempo that organized everything else: the shuffle of hooves on wet concrete, the low hum of the bulk tank compressor filling the room with a vibration she could feel in her sternum, the occasional clang of a kick bar when a heifer decided she was not yet ready to cooperate. Rachel moved through the routine the way her father had taught her twenty years earlier: attach, check, strip, move. The fluorescent lights above the parlor pit threw everything into that flat, shadowless glare that made the world feel as if it existed only inside these walls. The air was heavy with the smell of iodine teat dip and wet concrete and the faintly sweet undertone of fresh silage that clung to everything in the barn. Twenty-eight

This shortened version of the article is for promotional purposes on publicly accessible databases. Readers who wish to obtain the full text version of the article can order it via the url https://www.neilsonjournals.com/JBEE/abstractjbee23rachel.html Any enquiries, please contact the Publishing Editor, Peter Neilson pneilson@neilsonjournals.com © NeilsonJournals Publishing 2026.

hundred cows, three shifts, seven days a week. The cows did not care what day it was. Neither did the bills.

Her phone buzzed against her thigh at 4:47 AM. She ignored it. It buzzed again. She pulled it out with a wet glove, leaving a smear of teat dip across the screen. Her daughter Kayla, a second-year veterinary student at UC Davis, had sent a link with four words: Mom. Watch this now. Rachel did not watch it then. She finished the row, walked the milking cluster back to the rack, and pulled her gloves off before she tapped the link. The screen opened to a Vox article with drone footage embedded at the top. The headline read: "Americans Ditched Veal. What Replaced It May Be Just as Bad." The footage was shot from above, and it showed rows of white plastic hutches stretching toward the horizon under the Central Valley sun. Each hutch was roughly the size of a large dog crate. Inside each one was a calf. The calves were black, most of them, with the leggy frame and narrow face that came from crossing Holstein dams with Angus sires. Rachel knew that frame. She had been producing calves with that exact frame for three years. She had sold them to Grimmius Cattle Company at forty-eight hours old under a buyback contract that paid her six hundred dollars a head. She had never once asked where they went after the truck pulled away from her calf barn. She had never visited a Grimmius facility. She had never requested photos, welfare documentation, or third-party audit results. She had signed a contract, collected a check, and never thought about it again.

She set the phone on the stainless steel ledge above the pipeline and stood there for a long time. The vacuum lines pulsed. A cow shifted in the stanchion and let out a low groan. Rachel had spent her entire adult life in the dairy industry, and she understood better than most that animal agriculture involved tradeoffs that looked ugly to outsiders but existed for reasons that were not always wrong. Individual calf housing was standard practice. It prevented disease transmission in immunologically naive newborns. Veterinarians recommended it. She knew this. But she also knew that there was a distance between what was standard and what was right when the standard had been designed for convenience and never revisited. The buyback contract had added four hundred thousand dollars a year to her operation, and that money had paid for the freestall barn her cows slept in, the ventilation system that kept her somatic cell counts low, the health insurance she had finally been able to offer her employees. She had used the money well. She had used it to take better care of her own animals and her own people. And the calves that had generated that money were standing in plastic hutches in drone footage that was now circulating through every animal welfare organization on the internet. The question that formed in her mind was not complicated. It was the simplest question in the world: were those calves from our cows? And beneath it, the harder one, the one she already knew the answer to: did I not ask because I didn't want to know?