

Landmark Ruling: US Supreme Court Upholds California Animal Welfare Law, Setting Precedent for Animal Rights



On Thursday, May 12th, the US Supreme Court upheld a California law, Proposition 12, which requires farms to provide livestock, particularly pigs, with enough room to move if they want to sell their products in California markets. The law, which was set to go into effect in September 2022, faced opposition from the pork industry, led by the National Pork Producers Council (NPPC), who claimed that it violated the dormant Commerce Clause of the US Constitution.

The Commerce Clause allows Congress to regulate interstate commercial activity, and the dormant Commerce Clause is a doctrine used by courts to strike down laws that discriminate against out-of-state commerce or place too large a burden on interstate markets. The NPPC argued that California's law violated this doctrine because the vast majority of the farms impacted by the law are not based in California. In a statement, the NPPC condemned the ruling for "allowing state overreach" that "will increase prices for consumers and drive small farms out of business."

However, the court ultimately determined that Proposition 12 did not violate the dormant Commerce Clause. While different justices came to that conclusion for different reasons, the court declined to dramatically change the dormant Commerce Clause doctrine. Instead, it focused on the fact that there was no intentional protectionism and the difficulty of measuring the benefits and burdens of Proposition 12.

Justice Neil Gorsuch summed up the majority opinion at the beginning, stating, "Companies that choose to sell products in various States must normally comply with the laws of those various States. Assuredly, under this Court's dormant Commerce Clause decisions, no State may use its laws to discriminate purposefully against out-of-state economic interests. But the pork producers do not suggest that California's law offends this principle. Instead, they invite us to fashion two new and more aggressive constitutional restrictions on the ability of States to regulate goods sold within their borders. We decline that invitation."

Proposition 12 was passed in 2018, with 63% of California voters supporting it. Animal welfare organizations, like the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), expressed support for the law and called NPPC's lawsuit a "last-ditch effort" to stop reforms of a "broken system."

The ruling has significant implications for the future of animal welfare and the regulation of interstate commerce. Supporters of Proposition 12 argue that it will improve animal welfare and protect public health by reducing the risk of disease outbreaks associated with cramped living conditions. They also argue that the law will level the playing field for small farms that cannot compete with larger farms that prioritize profit over animal welfare.

On the other hand, opponents of the law argue that it places an unfair burden on out-of-state farmers who want to sell their products in California markets. They also argue that the law will increase costs for consumers and lead to the closure of small farms.

How the ruling will affect the pork industry and animal welfare in the United States remains to be seen. However, the court's decision to uphold Proposition 12 represents a significant victory for animal welfare advocates and a step forward in the regulation of interstate commerce.