

A Rural Revolution; A Time to Act against CAFOs¹

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The American Declaration of Independence proclaims: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

All across the nation, the rights of rural Americans to a safe and healthful environment are being threatened by forces beyond their individual control. Their rights to the peaceful enjoyment of their property are routinely denied. Many have been driven from homes they and their families before them have occupied for decades. They are subjected to polluted air, water, and soil contaminated with toxic chemicals, infectious diseases, and antibiotic resistant bacteria.ⁱ They have been denied their basic right to the pursuit of happiness.

So threatened and exploited, many rural people have pleaded, petitioned, and demanded intervention and protection from their government. They have proclaimed their right to a clean and healthful environment and the right to the peaceful enjoyment of their property. In response, both state and federal governments have consistently failed to address the grievances of their rural constituents. Government officials deny their ability to intervene or attempt to implement purposely ineffective or unenforceable laws, even as they subsidize and promote the oppressors of rural people. The oppressors of rural America are large-scale, corporately controlled confinement animal feeding operations – CAFOs.

Whenever the safety and happiness of any people are threatened by forces beyond their individual control, they have every right to petition their government and to demand that it fulfill its constitutional responsibilities. Whenever any government fails to respond to such demands, it

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is the right and responsibility of the people to alter or abolish it, and to establish a new government. The people have every right to expect their government to fulfill its fundamental responsibilities to protect the basic constitutional rights of the people, from which governments gain their just power to govern.

It's time for a revolution in rural America – a peaceful revolution in the defense of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Individuals are no match for the economically and politically powerful forces that promote and profit from CAFOs. Even when rural people resort to the courts they often are denied their right to intervene, because agricultural and environmental issues often are reserved for state and federal levels of government. The “agricultural establishment” – including corporate agribusiness, commodity organizations, the Farm Bureau Federation, USDA, agricultural universities, and state departments of agriculture – dictates state and federal agricultural policies and regulation. The economic and politically powerful are aligned in their support for corporate agribusiness – for CAFOs and against rural people. The only peaceful alternative is a revolution to reclaim and proclaim the right of “local control,” which the agricultural establishment is determined to take away from rural people.

The rights of self-defense and self-determination are not just American rights they are fundamental human rights. All people have a right to a safe and healthful environment in which to live without needless fears of sickness and death imposed upon them by others. All people of sound minds have a right to judge for themselves the conditions under which their health and safety are threatened by others. The burden of proof in such matters is not upon those who feel threatened but instead upon those who threaten. Rural people still have the ability to reclaim political power, at least at the local level, and to proclaim their unalienable rights of self-defense and self-determination.

The only means rural people currently have of protecting themselves from the very real and present threats posed by CAFOs are their local governments. Rural people must exercise this power in their own communities in order to join together with other communities to expand their influence and political power to state and federal levels as well. Governments have a constitutional responsibility to protect the unalienable rights of the people. Whenever governments prove to be “destructive to these ends,” the people have the right and responsibility to alter or abolish such governments and to institute new governments.

This is my *truth*. I write and speak my truth with conviction because I know *why* I believe what I believe. If your truth is different from mine, that's okay with me, as long as you know why you believe what you believe. However, just “because some so-called expert wrote it or said it,” is not a good reason to believe anything. My truth is based on conversations with hundreds of rural people, all across the U.S. and Canada – in sixteen states and three provinces – who are concerned about the threats of CAFOs to their communities. I have not just talked; I have also listened to people with a wide range of opinions, including operators of some very large CAFOs. My truth is also based on dozens of journal articles, books, and research reports related to the social, ecological, and economic impact of CAFOs. My truth is based on everything I have learned in more than 25-years of reading, studying, thinking, and listening to real people who were confronting the problems of *industrial* agriculture, of which CAFOs are a prime example.

Obviously, each community I have visited over the years is different, but they all have several things in common. The advocates invariably promote CAFOs as a logical rural economic development strategy and as the only means of maintaining a viable agriculture sector in farming communities. The opponents of CAFOs invariably are concerned about odors and pollution of streams and groundwater and about the impacts of CAFOs on the overall quality of life in their communities. Local public officials invariably are trying to determine whether potential economic benefits are worth the potential environmental risks and social costs. The only thing on which promoters and opponents of CAFOs agreed is that CAFOs invariably create personal conflicts that eventually rip the social fabric of rural communities to shreds.

Such conflicts were understandable in the early days of corporate contract livestock production, while the ultimate impacts of CAFOs on rural communities were still largely unknown. Earlier socioeconomic research had focused on the negative impacts of large, *industrial* agricultural operations on the quality of life in farming communities.ⁱⁱ However, we now know that CAFOs are the epitome of industrial agriculture. Virtually every study done on the subject in the past 20-years has confirmed the inevitable negative ecological, social, and economic impacts of CAFOs found in earlier studies of industrial agriculture.

The promises of rural economic development have proven to be empty. The promoters of CAFOs promise increased employment for economically depressed rural communities. To the contrary, socioeconomic research had consistently shown that both the social and economic quality of life is better in communities characterized by small, diversified family farms.

A 2006 study commissioned by the North Dakota Attorney General's Office provides a review of 56 different socioeconomic studies concerning the impacts of industrial agriculture on rural communities. It concluded: "Based on the evidence generated by social science research, we conclude that public concern about the detrimental community impacts of industrialized farming is warranted. In brief, this conclusion rests on five decades of government and academic concern with this topic, *a concern that has not abetted but that has grown more intense in recent years, as the social and environmental problems associated with large animal confinement operations [CAFOs] have become widely recognized* (italics added). It rests on the consistency of five decades of social science research which has found detrimental effects of industrialized farming on many indicators of community quality of life, particularly those involving the social fabric of communities. And it rests on the new round of risks posed by industrialized farming to Heartland agriculture, communities, the environment, and regional development as a whole."ⁱⁱⁱ

As the research verifies, the promised economic benefits of increased jobs and tax revenues never materialize, as most of the jobs go to people from outside the community. In addition, CAFOs spend relatively little for feed or other operating needs within their local communities. Even in cases where larger, specialized farming operations have brought more jobs to communities, they have also brought greater inequity in income distribution. The economic benefits went to a few wealthy investors, the new jobs were lower-paying than existing jobs, and communities were left with fewer middle-income taxpayers to support the community. The high salaries that raise the averages proclaimed by CAFO promoters go to corporate employees outside of rural areas. The rich became richer and the communities end up with more poor people. Any tax benefits resulting from increased economic activity are more than offset by increasing public expenditures for schools,

law enforcement, and social services, in addition to the increased costs of maintaining roads and bridges due to increased truck traffic hauling feed and livestock to and from CAFOs.

Perhaps most compelling, there is not a single community where CAFOs represent a significant segment of the local economy that is looked to by other communities as a model for rural community development. I have not found a single case where local property tax rates have been reduced or local public services overall have improved as a result of CAFOs choosing to locate in a community.

The only studies finding anything positive about CAFOs are those that focused solely on their aggregate economic impacts, while ignoring the negative impacts of income inequity on overall quality of life in communities. Among the problems associated with increasing income inequity were changes in the social composition of communities. Increasing numbers of poor immigrants in communities, regardless of their ethnicity, bring fundamental changes in the social composition and structure of communities. This typically leads to increasing social conflicts in schools, increased crime, and more family problems. A community “class structure” often emerges, or is amplified, in which some people are accepted as equals within the community and others are not. A typical result is a decrease in participation in community social and civic activities and less loyalty to local businesses. The local people lose their sense of community and their ability to function for the common good. When some few people benefit at the expense of the community as a whole, it seems to violate an important rural ethic that destroys the sense of community.

Some CAFO advocates openly sympathize with those who suffer from the demise of family farms and the disintegration of rural communities. However, they claim there are logical alternatives to CAFOs. They see CAFOs as the only possible future of animal agriculture. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth. If CAFOs are allowed to replace the remaining family livestock operations, it quite likely will mean the end of animal agriculture in America. The general public is becoming increasingly concerned about food safety and public health risks associated with CAFOs. They are also concerned with the inhumane treatment of animals in CAFOs, as evidenced by recent public referendums in several states. The American public eventually will reject CAFOs, and might easily reject the whole of animal agriculture, at least domestic animal agriculture, in the process.

As a result of growing public concern, many logical alternatives to today's industrial agriculture are already emerging. The new markets for natural, organic, local, and other sustainably produced foods are not just small market niches, as the critics claim. These markets are small today only because they are the early stages of creating new, post-industrial systems of farming and food production. Markets for organic foods have been the fastest growing segment of the American food system for the past 20 years, doubling every four to five years. Organic consumers are concerned about residues of pesticides, fertilizers, hormones, and antibiotics in their foods and in their environment. They are concerned about e-coli, salmonella, obesity, diabetes, and a wide range of social and ethical issues associated with today's industrial food system. Animal products from CAFOs tend to top the list of growing public concerns. Market surveys indicate that more than one-third of American consumers are searching for foods different from what they are finding in supermarkets and franchised restaurants today – and are willing to pay premium prices to get what they want.

Among the most promising of the new agricultural alternatives to CAFOs are grass-based, free-range, and pastured livestock and poultry. Grass-based livestock production reduces fossil energy use and greenhouse gas emission, cuts investment and production costs, reduces use of pesticides, fertilizer, and antibiotics, eliminates growth hormones, reduces soil erosion, facilitates proper manure management and humane treatment of farm animals. This is the future of animal agriculture – not CAFOs. Recent surveys indicate that around three-fourths of American consumers have a strong preference for foods grown locally on small family farms. They want to know where their food comes from, how it is produced, and who produced it. The future of American agriculture belongs to those who produce food with ecological and social integrity, not CAFOs.

Above all of the other concerns, public health is the Achilles Heel of CAFOs. The proponents' only defense against growing public health concerns is the call for more research. They reject calls for government restraints or regulations, insisting that any regulations imposed on CAFOs must be based on “sound science.” In truth, a large and growing body of sound scientific evidence already confirms the unacceptable environmental and public health risks associated with CAFOs. Those who continue to deny the existence of “sound science” are either completely misinformed or have a concept of science that is simply too narrow to address the *actual* health risks of CAFOs.

Some proponents are willing to admit that numerous scientific studies have found evidence of health risks, but point to other studies that have found no significant linkage between CAFOs to human health. For example, a 2004 Government Accounting office (GAO) report concluded, “Antibiotic-resistant bacteria have been transferred from animals to humans, and many of the studies we reviewed found that this transference poses significant risks for human health.”^{iv} The USDA, an ardent proponent of CAFOs, responded to the draft report by suggesting the conclusions of existing research was not conclusive, suggesting the GAO include more studies that questioned the significance of the linkage of antibiotic resistance to CAFOs. The GAO responded, “We found that only a few studies have concluded that the risk is minimal, while many studies have concluded that there is a significant human health risk from the transference.” The Center for Disease Control was even sharper in its rebuke of USDAs comments.

In calling for a nationwide moratorium on CAFOs, the American Public Health Association cited more than 40 scientific reports indicating health concerns related to CAFOs.^v The citations include research from prestigious institutions such as the University of North Carolina Medical School, the University of Iowa Medical School, and the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. In testifying before a U.S. congressional committee, the Director of the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health cited scientific evidence concerning the contamination of air, water, soil, and foods with toxic chemicals, infectious diseases, antibiotic resistant bacteria, and E. coli 0157:H7.^{vi} A prestigious commission funded by the Pew Charitable Trust concluded in their 2008 report, “The current industrial farm animal production system often poses unacceptable risks to public health, the environment and the welfare of the animals... the negative effects of the system are too great and the scientific evidence is too strong to ignore. Significant changes must be implemented and must start now.”^{vii} The preponderance of scientific evidence leaves little credible doubt that CAFOs represent unacceptable environmental and public health risks to rural people. The only remaining question is whether rural people will be afforded their right to do anything about it.

Like the tobacco companies of the 1970s and 1980s, the “agricultural establishment” will continue to argue it is illogical and unreasonable to prohibit or even regulate CAFOs in the absence of a scientific *consensus* – which they interpret as unanimous agreement. They will continue to point to a few scientists at agricultural universities who routinely criticize any research deemed detrimental to corporate agribusiness. However, complete unanimity is not necessary to justify public policy. After decades of research indicating to the contrary, tobacco company executives were still testifying under oath before Congress that the research had failed to *prove* that tobacco is addictive. Later legal revelations proved they were lying.

The same principle of precaution must be applied to CAFOs that is applied to other environmental and public health issues. “The *precautionary principle* is a moral and political principle stating that if an action or policy might cause severe or irreversible harm to the public, in the absence of a scientific consensus that harm would not ensue, the burden of proof falls on those who advocate taking the action. The precautionary principle is most often applied in the context of the impact of human actions on the environment and human health; as both involve complex systems where the consequences of actions may be unpredictable.”^{viii}

The precautionary principle clearly imposes the burden of proof upon those who create the risk, not on those who are threatened. The precautionary principle is “sound science.” It is applied more widely in Europe, but it is also applied in the United States in most situations involving human health. For example, the drug manufacturers bear the legal responsibility for providing conclusive evidence, if not proof, that their proposed new drugs are safe and effective before they are approved for sale. Obviously, this approach is not foolproof, as some harmful drugs reach the market. But the burden of proof of product safety is clearly on the drug manufacturer. Likewise, the public should not be deemed responsible for *proving* that CAFOS are a threat to public health to justify their regulation to protect public health.

Under the precautionary principle, residents of rural communities have every right to demand that government regulate or even prohibit CAFOs, if prohibition is necessary to protect public health from the public health risks posed by CAFOs. They need not *prove*, or even provide *conclusive* evidence, that CAFOs are detrimental to the environment or public health; they need only present *compelling evidence*, which clearly already exists. The burden of proof is upon those who advocate CAFOs, not upon the residents of rural communities. The proponents must *prove* that CAFOs are safe, which they clearly cannot prove, particularly while claiming that current evidence is *inconclusive*.

Local health ordinances seem to hold the greatest promise for securing the rights of rural people. Thus far, state courts have upheld the rights of local communities to pass regulations more stringent than federal and state laws, when clearly justified to protect public health. States can exclude agricultural operations from local zoning ordinances, but public health takes precedence over zoning. States can even interfere in interstate commerce when deemed necessary to protect public health. The evidence supporting the need for local health ordinances would appear to be compelling. It remains only for people in rural communities to make forceful and compelling cases for local control of CAFOs to protect public health.

Rural people have pleaded, petitioned, and demanded actions from their governments to protect them from the adverse impacts of CAFOs. Thus far, federal and state governments have been unwilling to respond. Obviously, current state and federal environmental regulations are inadequate to protect the public health of rural areas, as has been proven repeatedly in areas where CAFOs currently operate under such regulations. The politicians have simply been unwilling to defy the economic and political power of the agricultural establishment.

The only protection or relief rural people have been able to secure has been through their local governments, or as a last resort, through private lawsuits brought to recover damages. Even at the local level, the agricultural establishment often wields considerable economic and political power. As a result, oftentimes actions at the local level require changes in local government, including changes in local government officials. At least, local people have the power to make changes at the local level. Collective actions by community activists seem to be the only force capable of making even local governments respond to the legitimate concerns of the people.

When governments refuse to act, the people must. Rural people are left with no alternative other than to stand up for themselves – for their basic democratic rights of self-defense and self-determination. In virtually every state where CAFOs are prominent the agricultural establishment is working through their state legislatures to deny the peoples' right of local control. However, this strategy could well backfire. What rural people need most is a court case they can take all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court proclaiming that their basic rights to protect their health and physical well-being from the threats imposed by CAFOs – their rights of self-determination and self-defense. A group of counties and municipalities could implement similarly well defined, carefully worded, legally defensible health ordinances. They could share the cost of defending one ordinance, and in the process, defend all. Such a court victory would clearly establish the right of all people to a healthful environment and the right of people of sound mind to decide for themselves when their health is threatened. If their government fails to act, the people must.

Rural communities are at a critical point in their history. The most valuable assets many rural communities possess are their healthy natural environment and their strong sense of community. Many are still places with clean air, clean water, open spaces, scenic landscapes, and opportunities for people to lead lives of relative peace, quiet, and privacy. Many are still places where people have a sense of belonging, friendly places where people know and care about each other, where crime rates are low and a strong sense of safety and security still exists. Such places are becoming increasingly scarce in America, and thus are becoming increasingly valuable. Many rural communities are being asked to sacrifice their futures so a few investors and corporate stockholders can benefit economically from CAFOs.

Fortunately, the most important impact of CAFOs on rural America may turn out to be that they have sparked a new rural revolution. The future leadership of rural communities is emerging today among the opponents of CAFOs. They are learning to organize and to work together to make a difference in the future of their communities. Community action groups are joining together to confront the agricultural establishment at state and federal levels. Only by rural communities working together for the common good, can rural people ever expect to overpower the agricultural establishment. Rural people certainly aren't winning all the battles but they are slowly winning the war.

Now is the time for people of rural communities to rise up in revolution and reclaim their right to a healthy environment. Now is the time for rural people to invest their time, their energy, their intellect, and their money in the future of their communities. The future of rural communities is not in attracting outside corporate investments. The future is in the land and in the imagination, creativity, ethics, and honesty of rural people. Now is the time for rural people to demand action from their governments. If their governments fail to act, they must institute new governments, laying their foundation on such principles and organizing their powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their Safety and Happiness.” Now is the time to act. Now is the time for a rural revolution.

End Notes

i Robert Lawrence, MD, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, “Superfund Laws and Animal Agriculture,” Subcommittee on Environment and Hazardous Materials, November 16, 2005.
<http://energycommerce.house.gov/reparchives/108/Hearings/11162005hearing1714/Lawrence.pdf>

ii Lobao, Linda M. 1990. *Locality and Inequality: Farm and Industry Structure and Socioeconomic Condition*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.

iii Curtis Stofferahn, “Industrialized Farming and Its Relationship to Community Well-Being: an Update of the 2000 Report by Linda Labao,” special report prepared for the North Dakota, Office of Attorney General,
<http://www.und.edu/org/ndrural/Lobao%20&%20Stofferahn.pdf> (accessed December 2006).

iv U.S. Government Accounting Office Report 04-490, April 2004 Antibiotic Resistance; Federal Agencies Need to Better Focus Efforts to Address Risk to Humans from Antibiotic Use in Animals,
<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d04490.pdf>

v American Public Health Association, *Association News*, 2003 Policy Statements, <http://www.apha.org/legislative>.

vi Robert Lawrence, MD, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, “Superfund Laws and Animal Agriculture,” Subcommittee on Environment and Hazardous Materials, November 16, 2005.
<http://energycommerce.house.gov/reparchives/108/Hearings/11162005hearing1714/Lawrence.pdf>

vii Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production: Putting Meat on The Table: Industrial Farm Animal Production in America, http://www.pewtrusts.org/news_room_detail.aspx?id=38438 , full report, <http://www.ncifap.org/>.

viii Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, “precautionary principle,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precautionary_principle.