

Impacts of CAFOs on Rural Communities¹

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The only thing that promoters and opponents of large-scale confinement animal feeding operations (CAFOs) agreed on is that CAFOs invariably create conflicts in rural communities. The CAFO promoters accuse the opponents of being emotional, uninformed, radicals, opposed to modern agriculture and to progress in general. The opponents accuse the CAFO promoters of being insensitive, self-seeking bullies, unconcerned about the rights other people in the community. Eventually, virtually everyone in the community lines up on one side or the other of these arguments. Over time, those on one side lose all sense of commonality or community with those on the other. Everywhere CAFOs become a significant public issue, the social fabric of rural communities is ripped to shreds.

CAFOs are invariably promoted to communities as a logical rural economic development strategy and the only means of maintaining a viable local agricultural economy. CAFOs invariably are opposed by community members because of concerns about noxious odors and pollution of streams and groundwater – which ultimately are health concerns – and about the impacts of CAFOs on the overall quality of life in their communities. Local public officials are invariably put in the uncomfortable position of trying to decide whether any potential economic benefits of CAFOs are worth the ecological and social costs.

The promoters of CAFOs tend to target communities that are desperate for economic development, although they may later branch out into surrounding areas. Local leaders are told that the CAFO will add to local employment and the local tax base. The effects of increased local spending for buildings, equipment, feed, and feeder livestock are supposed to multiply as they ripple through the community, resulting in additional expenditures for groceries, clothes, housing, automobiles, healthcare, and other consumer necessities. Increased property tax collections will then pay for better local schools, roads, and other public services. The promoters claim that the CAFOs are a natural result of our free market economy. If they don't locate here they will just locate somewhere else, local farmers will be denied an opportunity to succeed, and the local community will be left without an agricultural economy.

Initially, most opponents of CAFOs are concerned about the inevitable odors caused by the huge quantities of livestock manure generated by CAFOs. However, as they begin to learn more about CAFOs, they become aware of other environmental risks – pollution of streams and

¹ Prepared for presentation at *Indiana's State-wide CAFO Watch Conference*, Sponsored by the Socially Responsible Agricultural Project (SRA), Hartford City, IN. July 26, 2008.

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aquifers with biological wastes and the human health risks associated with air and water pollution. They also become aware of growing concerns about the higher risks of E-coli O157:H7 and antibiotic resistant bacteria, including MRSA, and even “mad cow” disease associated with CAFOs. As local opponents begin to communicate with those in existing CAFO communities, they become increasingly concerned about the potential impacts of CAFOs on the overall quality of life in their communities. They also begin to challenge the economic claims of CAFO proponents, because people in other communities have been made the same promises and they have proven to be empty.

Such community conflicts were understandable in the early days of contract livestock production, while the ultimate impacts of large-scale CAFOs on rural communities were still largely unknown. Earlier socioeconomic research had focused on the negative impacts of large, industrial agricultural operations on traditional diversified farming communities.ⁱ We know now that CAFOs are the epitome of industrial agriculture. But, most of the earlier studies had focused on crop production and there was no *proof* that the earlier studies were also relevant to large-scale confinement animal feeding operations.

Today, however, there is no legitimate reason for these conflicts to continue. Virtually every study done on the subject in the past 20-years has confirmed the inevitable negative community impacts of CAFOs suggested by earlier studies. The research had consistently shown that both the social and economic quality of life is better in communities characterized by small, diversified family farms. Even in cases where larger, specialized farming operations have brought more jobs and total income to communities, they have also brought greater inequity in income distribution. The rich got richer and the communities got more poor people. 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 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.

A 2006 study commissioned by the North Dakota Attorney General's Office provides a review of 56 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.”ⁱⁱ

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. As a result there is typically a decrease in participation in community social and civic activities and less loyalty to local businesses – the community loses its sense of community and its 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.

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. The research verifies that most of the promised increases in tax revenues never materialize, as most of the jobs go to people from outside the community and CAFOs spend relatively little for feed or other operating needs within their local communities. I have not found a single case where local property tax rates have been reduced or local public services have been improved as a result of CAFOs choosing to locate in a community. 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.

With respect to the opponents' arguments, a growing body of scientific evidence has confirmed that the health and environmental concerns associated with CAFOs are justified. Those who continue to deny the existence of sound science indicating significant human health risks are either completely misinformed or have a concept of science that is simply too narrow to address the *actual* health risks of CAFOs. Some CAFO proponents 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.”ⁱⁱⁱ The USDA, an ardent proponent of CAFOs, responded to the draft report by suggesting that the conclusions of existing research on the issue was not conclusive, and suggested that 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 USDA's 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.^{iv} The citations include research from such prestigious institutions 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.^v 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.”^{vi} The preponderance of scientific leaves little credible doubt that CAFOs

represent significant environmental and health risks to rural residents. The only remaining question is whether rural people have the right to do anything about it.

Rural communities are at a critical point in their history. Many rural communities today are being asked to sacrifice their future to CAFOs so a few local “farmers” and outside corporate investors can benefit economically. The most valuable assets many rural communities possess are their natural environment and their strong sense of community. Many are still places with clean air, clean water, open spaces, scenic landscapes, and opportunities for 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 attributes are becoming increasingly scarce in America, and thus are becoming increasingly valuable. Rural communities are sacrificing their futures for CAFOs.

As rural areas become polluted and their sense of community degraded, they are losing their most precious future resource, the next generation, as their children leave for the cities for better opportunities. In fact, rural parents routinely advise their children to go away to college and get a good education so they won't have to return to the rural community or farm for a living. Thankfully, many rural people are beginning to realize there is no future in turning their communities into dumping grounds for the rest of society – not for CAFOs or for landfills, toxic waste incinerators, and prisons. Unfortunately, many just don't know what else to do. They have been systematically abused for so long they have come to accept the degradation as inevitable.

Federal and state governments are not going to help them; politicians are simply not willing to defy the economic and political power of the agricultural establishment. Obviously, current environmental and health regulations are inadequate to protect rural areas, as seen in repeated and persistently negative health and environmental effects in areas where CAFOs currently operate under such regulations. So, 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. Thus far, the courts have upheld the rights of local communities to pass regulations more stringent than federal and state laws, when clearly justified for the protection of public health. The evidence needed to justify local health ordinances would appear to be compelling. It remains only for people in rural communities to make compelling cases for local control of CAFOs. Once the people of rural communities have reclaimed their right to a healthy and clean environment, they can begin the task of rebuilding an economic, social, and ecological foundation needed for *sustainable* community development. The future opportunities of rural communities are virtually unlimited as the industrial era draws to a close. The future of rural communities is in the land and the imagination, creativity, ethics, and honesty of the people of rural communities, not in soliciting or begging for outside corporate investments.

In fact, the most important impact of CAFOs on rural communities 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. They certainly aren't winning all the battles but they are slowly winning the war. Now is the time for communities to rise up and reclaim their right to protect their environment from industrial, corporate agriculture. Now is the time for the people of rural communities to invest their time, their energy, their intellect, their money, and their integrity in restoring the health and productivity of their land and their environment. Now is

the time for rural communities to demand their democratic right to exert local control over CAFOs, and in so doing, to begin to take control of their own destinies.

End Notes

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

ii 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).

iii 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>

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

v 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>

vi 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/>.