

JFAN Annual Meeting 2017—Pre-note Address

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The theme of this year's meeting is: **Breaking the Grip of Corporate Agriculture on Rural Iowa.** *Concentrated animal feeding operations or CAFOs are the epitome of corporate agriculture.* The “agricultural establishment,” including the Iowa Pork Producers Assn. and the Iowa Farm Bureau, have mounted a multi-million dollar propaganda campaign to try to convince us that CAFOs are no different from family farming.

But, virtually all of the hogs and chickens in Iowa are either produced by non-farm corporations or under comprehensive corporate contracts that essentially dictate every aspects of these operations. In most cases, corporations even own the hogs or chickens. The only important decision CAFO operators make is whether or not to build the CAFO. Once they have built it, usually with borrowed money, the operators are essentially locked into economic servitude for the life of the building.

The traditional family farmer's “right to farm,” has been turned into a corporate “right to harm”—the right to pollute the air and water with potential toxic chemical and biological waste, to threaten public health, to disrupt rural communities and destroy rural economies. **It's time to break corporate agriculture's grip on rural Iowa.**

These corporations are purely economic entities. They are created to serve the common interest of their investors or shareholders—who may have strong individual social and ethical values. But, the only “common interest” they share is their desire to increase the value of their investments. With pension funds, mutual funds, and electronic trading, most people don't even know which stocks they own at any given time. So, profits inevitably take priority over people. **We simply cannot allow the economic rights of corporations to take priority over the rights of people to clean air, clean water, safe food—or the “rights” of real farmers' “to farm”.**

Traditional family farming is not just a means of making money; **it also is a way of life.** Farm families obviously need to make a living, but real farmers don't do things that threatened the health or well-being of their neighbors or customers—or pollute and degrade the soil, air, or water. The CAFO controversy is not a matter of farms versus towns or rural versus urban—but the democratic rights of people against the economic rights of corporations.

The vast majority of farmers in Jefferson County are not under corporate control, and many share the traditional family farming values. These farmers have as much to lose as those of us who live in town. The long run corporate strategy is to turn rural Iowa into an agricultural sacrifice zone where they are free to pollute and plunder as they please. They would turn rural Iowa into a corporate cesspool. Living “in” a cesspool is even worse than living on “island” in the middle of a cesspool. **Rural and urban people have a strong “common interest” breaking the corporate grip on rural Iowa.**

The corporations are trying to divide us because the only power greater than **corporate power** is the **power of the people**. Margaret Wheatley, a leading thinker on institutional and cultural change recently identified three major trends in American society: First, “*A growing sense of impotence and dread about the state of the nation,*” second, “*The realization that information doesn’t change minds anymore,*” and third, “*The clarity that the world changes through local communities taking action—that there is no greater power for change than a community taking its future into its own hands.*”

I agree with Wheatley. **First**, I think the prevailing mood in rural Iowa today is one of “impotence and dread.” A while back, an Iowa State University survey concluded: “the predominant attitude both *toward* and *within* rural communities is that they have no future. The last election seemed to confirm, this mood has only grown worse. **Second**, I agree that information no longer changes minds. As we at JFAN consistently point out, we now have more than 50 years of “sound science” and real-world experience confirming the negative environmental, social, and economic impact of CAFOs on rural communities. Corporate agriculture has responded by hiring big public relations firms to “greenwash” CAFOs by creating a set of “alternative facts.” Many public officials continue to promote CAFOs. The general public doesn’t know who to believe.

So where is the hope for the future of rural Iowa? The hope is in the ***clarity that the world changes through local communities taking action.*** People in rural Iowa should use every legal means available to protect themselves. But, we also must also find ways to change our laws—including changing those who make our laws, if necessary. We must come together—farm and non-farm, rural and urban—as communities with a common interest and commitment to **breaking the grip of corporate agriculture on our communities.**

There are still many places in rural Iowa, like Jefferson County, that have vibrant and viable rural communities. These communities still have clean water, clean air, scenic landscapes, and people who care for the land and care about each other. These places belong to all of us—rural and urban, farm and non-farm. We know how to produce plenty of pork and poultry without destroying the quality of life in these places. Farms of the future will be different from those of the past, but they must be rooted in the values of traditional family farms. They must be good places to live and make a living—and also good places to live around.

Perhaps the traditional family farm is an “ideal” or myth—that never existed in reality. But if so, no more so than the “ideal” of the American Democracy. Regardless, these are “ideals” we must continue to strive to achieve. Our democratic **ideal** is embodied in our unalienable rights of “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.” In individual liberties tempered by equity justice for all. The **ideal** of family farming is a way to make a living tempered by strong social and ethical values.

Rural people need not continue to live with the sense of “impotence and dread;” there are positive possibilities for a new and better future for rural Iowa. Information may not change minds, but “ideals” **can** change minds. It may not be quick or easy, but together, can create a better future. Together, we can **break the grip corporate agriculture on rural Iowa.** “**There is no greater power for change than a community taking its future into its own hands.**”