

## Going Public with Concerns about CAFOs<sup>1</sup>

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Finally, the promoters of concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFOs, are on the defensive – after many years of persistent opposition. The general public is beginning to awaken to the problems and perils of CAFOs. The war against CAFOs may be far from won, but the tide of the battle seems to be turning. As might be expected at this point, the defenders of CAFOs have mounted major counteroffensives all across the country. For example, the US Farmers and Ranchers Alliance (USFRA) is a new national public relations initiative defending so-called modern, industrial agriculture. It is supported by a multi-million dollar annual budget provided by major agricultural commodity organizations and agribusiness corporations.<sup>i</sup> Bob Stallman who is president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, a major promoter of CAFOs, also serves as chairman of the USFRA.

The primary objective of the organization is to defend modern industrial agriculture against a growing wave of public concerns, as the public relations firm in charge of USFRA propaganda readily admits. Several states have formed “Farmers Care” organizations with similar missions and are collaborating with USFRA to portray a positive public image for industrial agriculture, which includes a series of public forums or “Food Dialogues.”<sup>ii</sup> “Breakfasts on the Farm” have become popular events where the public is invited to visit local farms for breakfast.<sup>iii</sup> These groups claim to be advocates for all types of farms, which is but a thinly-disguised effort to obscure their obvious pro-corporate/industrial agriculture bias.

Naturally, CAFOs are highlighted in the current “defense of farming” initiatives, since CAFOs are the epitome of so-called modern, industrial agriculture. Young families who own CAFOs are featured in videos as the faces of modern agriculture. These families talk about their love of farming, concern for their communities, and their commitments to caring for their animals and protecting the environment. CAFOs are touted as the only means many multi-generational farmers have for continuing the family tradition of farming.

The USFRA website defines “food safety, animal welfare, water quality, and consumer prices and choices” as their major lines of defense.<sup>iv</sup> With respect of animal welfare, the propaganda claims animals in CAFOs are actually treated more humanely than in previous non-confinement facilities. They claim confinement buildings are well-ventilated to keep animals cool in the summer and can be closed in the winter to protect animals from the cold. Baby pigs are provided a warmer environment during winter farrowing and farrowing crates protect them from accidental crushing by their mothers. They claim slotted concrete floors provide a much cleaner environment than do open lots or pastures, and efficient ventilation systems provide

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animals with plenty of clean, fresh air. CAFOs are portrayed as veritable pork palaces where happy pigs lead peaceful lives of perpetual comfort.

Proponents also claim that CAFOs are actually better for water quality, and the environment in general, than were the pastures or open feed lots. They tout the effectiveness of modern manure management systems, with comprehensive manure plans that include details of where and when manure will be spread. Modern manure storage facilities that allow manure to be spread only one or two times a year are replacing open manure “lagoons,” thus minimizing any odor problems for neighbors. CAFO proponents claim that neighbors who continue to complain about odors or water quality problems are people from cities who have moved into rural areas and don't understand the environmental realities of farming. After all, CAFOs are subjected to strict U.S. and state environmental regulation, so they claim.

CAFO proponents respond to food safety concerns with proclamations that Americans have the safest, most healthful food system in the world. They tout the biosecurity and other sanitation measures taken by CAFOs as a reflection of commitment by modern agriculture to ensuring food safety as well as minimizing diseases. Organic, free-range, pasture-based, and other systems of livestock and poultry production are touted as means of providing consumers with choices. The clear message is that other producers should reciprocate by not saying anything derogatory about CAFOs. Whenever food safety concerns break through into headlines, however, CAFO advocates are quick to direct public scrutiny to organic production practices or to smaller, less-regulated operations, such as farmers markets and direct sales of raw milk. Laws against criticizing industrial food products (veggie libel laws) have been largely ineffective, so industrial agriculture has turned to public relations as a means of silencing criticism. Continuing concerns regarding a variety of public health risks associated with CAFOs are brushed aside as being anecdotal and lacking in scientific credibility.

In an attempt to seal their case, proponents claim CAFOs are the only means of providing consumers with adequate quantities of meat, milk, and eggs at affordable prices. The groups point to the growth in CAFOs as clear and compelling evidence that CAFO are simply a rational producer response to consumer demand. They argue that CAFOs could not have displaced the smaller livestock and poultry operations if CAFOs were not more economically efficient in providing the products that consumers need and want. Even if some consumer have concerns about animal welfare, the environment, and food safety, proponents claim that such concerns are small prices to pay for the economic benefits of CAFOs. Nothing worthwhile in life is ever without some risks. Obviously, more people are concerned about keeping prices low than about any added risks associated with CAFOs; otherwise we wouldn't have CAFOs.

In general, CAFO proponents blame growing public concerns for animal welfare and environment issues on radical “animal rights” and environmental groups that are more concerned about funding their organizations than protecting animals or the environment. Those who are concerned about food safety and the demise of family farms are labeled as “Luddites” or “idealists” who resist progress or long to return to some idealistic past that never really existed. After all, farmers depend on healthy animals and fertile soil for their livelihood, they say. Voluntary compliance with industry-defined standards of good management practices is all that is needed. The impersonal forces of a free-market economy has chosen CAFOs: Case closed!

Most long-time veterans of the CAFO wars know the fallacies of such claims, but proponents are banking on being able to sell their pro-CAFO propaganda to a largely-uninformed general public. This means that CAFO opponents must to be willing to move their battles beyond the concerns of rural communities and into the larger arena of general public opinion. Although CAFO opponents lack the corporate funding of those who promote CAFOs, we have one important advantage: We don't have to rely on false propaganda; we only need to tell the truth.

First, we need to continually remind the public that opponents of CAFOs are not opponents of “real agriculture” or “real farming.” Although there are many “bad actors” among CAFO owners and operators, in truth, many others are simply “good people” who have become entrapped in a “bad system.” In fact, most *opponents* of CAFOs are actually *proponents* of animal agriculture. We oppose CAFOs because they are the epitome of everything that is wrong about large-scale, specialized, standardized, corporately-controlled *industrial* agriculture.

We also need to admit that it may be *theoretically* possible to plan, construct, and operate a CAFO in a manner that would not threaten the natural environment or public health. The problem is that CAFOs don't operate in a theoretical world; they must cope with the vagaries of an unpredictable reality. CAFOs operators can host “breakfasts on the farm” and visits by various dignitaries because, for at least for a few days, they can clean up their act and operate responsibly when it's needed for good public relations. While some CAFOs may not harm the environment some of the time, the hard, cold truth is that whenever a significant number are located in a given area, one or more of the CAFOs will be polluting the environment at any given time, and any one of them will be polluting at least some of the time.

If CAFOs are models of environmental stewardship, why has the US EPA found 35,000 miles of rivers and groundwater in 17 states polluted by CAFOs?<sup>v</sup> Why have the number of waterways labeled as “impaired” by the Iowa DNR jumped from 215 in 1987 to 642 in 2012, as CAFOs took over the Iowa hog industry?<sup>vi</sup> The fact that some streams are still clean and some water wells are still not contaminated, is not a logical defense. If such pollution is a result of irresponsible management, then irresponsible management obviously is widespread and ongoing among CAFO operators. The pollutants originating from CAFOs include nitrogen, phosphorus, antibiotics, pesticides, and heavy metals. Municipalities along these streams have been forced to add costly waste treatment facilities to mitigate the effects of CAFOs on their drinking water.

Why have massive “dead zones” have been created in the Gulf of Mexico, Chesapeake Bay, and elsewhere by CAFOs and the large-scale, chemical-intensive, industrial corn and soybean operations that provide their feed grains. These consequences are not the result of a “few bad actors;” these are characteristic of an *under-regulated* “industry.” The environmental regulation of CAFOs has been largely ineffective because CAFO proponents have convinced lawmakers that CAFOs are farms, not factories, and farming is exempted from many environmental regulations. Meanwhile, the “right to farm” has resulted in about 800 officially reported manure spills in Iowa since 1995, and numbers of polluted streams and water wells continue to grow.<sup>vii</sup> These are facts, not propaganda.

If CAFOs are havens for humane care of animals, why have CAFO proponents promoted “Ag Gag Laws” in virtually every significant livestock producing state? These laws make it a crime for anyone, including employees of CAFOs, to take pictures that document animal abuse or environmental violations. There would be no motive for Ag Gag Laws if animals in CAFOs were treated as well every day as they are when the public is invited for “breakfast on the farm” or when visiting politicians are bought through on public relations tours. Real farmers should be proud to have scenes from their farms video recorded and shown on YouTube. The cold, hard truth is that while animals may appear to be well-treated in some CAFOs some of the time, some animals are horribly abused in some operations some of the time, and all suffer from “unnatural confinement” all of the time.

Admittedly, major anti-CAFO initiatives have been mounted by mainstream animal protection organizations, such as the Humane Society of the United States and the Farm Sanctuary. These initiatives have focused on providing more space for animals in confinement systems. However, there is simply no way that massive numbers of animals can be treated humanely while in the large confinement facilities that typify CAFOs. Farm animals did not evolve to live in confinement any more so than humans evolved to live in prisons. There is simply no opportunity to afford farm animals the dignity and respect that must precede humane treatment when the animals are confined in large-scale concentrated feeding operations. Animals are sentient, feeling, living organisms or beings, not inanimate mechanisms. Real farmers treat animals with dignity and respect – even when they ultimately are to be used for human food.

CAFO proponents respond to food safety and other public health concerns with platitudes rather than facts concerns, because *public health* may well be the Achilles' heel of CAFOs. CAFOs have been linked to numerous illnesses and even deaths caused by chemical and biological contamination of streams and groundwater. The odors from CAFOs are not just an obvious and obnoxious nuisance but also contain chemical compounds that are known to contribute to a variety of respiratory illnesses. CAFOs are also natural breeding grounds for a variety of harmful pathogens. Massive recalls of contaminated foods have become almost commonplace in the U.S. One such recall involved billions of eggs as a result of contamination with salmonella. A deadly version of the common E. coli bacteria, E-Coli 0157:H7, has caused illness and death and has resulted in a number of nationwide food recalls. This pathogen has resulted from feeding high-energy grain rations to animals that have evolved to eat forages. Other organisms originating in CAFOs, including campylobacter and cryptosporidium, contribute to illnesses of millions of Americans each year.

Perhaps most significant among the public health risks associated with CAFOs is the dramatic increase in instances of antibiotic resistant bacteria, such as *multidrug-resistant Staphylococcus aureus* or MRSA, which reportedly kills more Americans than AIDS. An estimated 80 percent of all antibiotics produced in the United States are used in animal agriculture, many of which are also used to treat diseases in humans. Numerous studies by reputable public health institutions have documented that antibiotics use in CAFOs has contributed to the development of antibiotic resistance in disease-causing pathogens.<sup>viii</sup> CAFO operators routinely give sub-therapeutic or small doses of antibiotics to animals to make them grow faster and prevent disease outbreaks among the animals in close confinement. The small doses are not sufficient to kill all members of a given strain of bacteria, which allows the most

resistant organisms to multiply and eventually dominate the bacteria strain. CAFOs are degrading the entire health-care system of the United States.

In spite of growing concerns, CAFOs have continued to grow. Contrary to the claims of proponents, however, the growth in CAFOs is not a response to consumer demands. CAFOs are not more economically efficient than many of the well-managed independent farming operations they have forced out of business. CAFOs need only be more efficient than the least-efficient one-third to one-half of independent producers to gain a sufficient share of the market to displace the remaining more-efficient producers. Most corporations that produce through CAFOs are “vertically integrated,” meaning they control more than one stage in the production process. Vertically-integrated corporations can keep retail and wholesale prices high during periods of cyclical oversupply and thus keep live animal prices low enough for long enough to force even the most-efficient of independent producers out of business. Once CAFOs dominate a market, periodic oversupply situations are addressed by manipulating or cancelling contracts with growers, which keeps retail prices high and corporate margins at highly profitable levels for stockholders. As a result, CAFOs would not necessarily result in lower prices for meat, milk, and eggs for consumers, even if they were more economically efficient than independent producers.

This is not anti-CAFO propaganda. USDA statistics clearly show that retail prices for meat, milk, and eggs have continued to rise, in some cases rise dramatically, as animal production was moving off of independent family farms and into contract CAFOs.<sup>ix</sup> As the market power of corporate contractors grows, the price spreads between farm-level prices and retail prices widen, leaving retail prices even higher than before. In addition, much of the recent increases in meat produced in CAFOs in going to export markets rather than to reduce food costs for American consumers. As if to punctuate this trend, the largest Chinese meat packing company is in the process of buying Smithfield Foods, the largest U.S. meat packer. CAFOs are designed to benefit corporate investors – not farmers, not rural communities, and not consumers. Once the independent producers were eliminated from the mainstream food system, consumers were left without alternatives to CAFOs. That's the reason why alternatives to CAFOs, such as organic, free-range, and natural food products are now emerging: To give consumers a real choice.

When all else fails to silence consumer concerns, CAFOs proponents point out that a certain amount of risk to the environment and public health is inherent in any worthwhile economic activity, including CAFOs. Admittedly, there are inevitable and necessary risks in life. However, there are “no economic benefits” from CAFOs to offset their obvious environmental, animal welfare, or public health risks. These conclusions are not based on idealism or emotion. The pendulum of “good science” has swung in opposition to CAFOs. There are reams of scientific studies that confirm the growing public concerns about CAFOs.<sup>x</sup> The proponent's only defense is an ambitious program of pro-CAFO propaganda designed to mask the cold, hard truth.

In response to the propaganda, we must stress that we are not opposed to farmers or ranchers, but we are opposed to any system of production that threatens the health and well-being of both rural and urban Americans. The CAFO promoters are using “good people” to protect a “bad system.” Until now, most of our efforts have focused on issues of greatest concern to people in rural communities. To confront the new propaganda campaign, we must expand the perimeter of the battleground to embrace the growing concerns about broader issues, such as animal

protection and public health. These are issues that affect everyone. These are the issues that have spurred CAFO proponents into their defensive strategies. These are the issues on which we can ultimately win the war against CAFOs. To win, we will need to build bridges between rural and urban America and go public with the growing concerns about CAFOs.

That said, we must not falter or fade in our battle to help people in rural communities defend themselves from the continuing onslaught of CAFOs. The defenders of CAFOs are relentless in their arguments that CAFOs are essential for the economic viability of family farms and rural communities, regardless of public concerns about the environment, animal welfare, or public health. The USDA, state departments of agriculture, and major agricultural universities are all promoting CAFOs as the future of animal agriculture and the economic foundation of rural America. It's difficult to blame people who listen to those they should be able to trust.

So, we must continue to emphasize that CAFOs are not a logical strategy for rural economic development, regardless of what those in our public institutions may claim. CAFOs are not the future of farming. They are not real farms and are in fact destroying the future of farming. Between 1980 and 2008, years of major growth in CAFOs, the U.S.D.A. statistics indicate the number of beef cattle operations fell by 41%, the total number of hog farms declined by 90%, and the number of dairy farms fell by 80%.<sup>xi</sup> Between 1992 and 2004 alone, the number of hog farms fell by more than 70 percent, whereas the inventory of total hog numbers remained stable.<sup>xii</sup> The CAFOs weren't producing more hogs; they were just producing a similar number of hogs with far fewer hog farmers. This is not propaganda but fact: CAFOs drive real farmers out of business.

The number of independent producers displaced by CAFOs is inevitably greater than the number of people employed by CAFOs. CAFOs gain their economic advantage by specializing in specific phases of livestock or poultry production, which allows production processes to be standardized, routinized, and mechanized. As a result CAFOs can be operated without skilled labourers and each worker can oversee more animals and each owner/investor can control more CAFO operations. CAFOs are factories, not farms. Any economic advantages of CAFOs result from reducing labor costs and spreading management costs over more animals. As a result, CAFOs inevitably employ fewer people at lower levels of compensation in the process of producing a given number of animals than do non-factory operations.

As a result of the low-pay and poor working conditions, most people employed in CAFOs are not local residents but immigrants into rural areas who are desperate for work. These immigrants may be good, hard-working people, but they create increased needs for education, health care, law enforcement, and other public services – at least proportionate to their numbers. Increased traffic of heavy trucks on local roads and bridges also add economic burdens to local governments. CAFOs typically add little to local tax revenues, as they often receive preferential tax assessments. In addition, CAFOs tend to do business with companies in major trade centers rather than with local businesses. Perhaps most telling, no community in the U.S. that relies on CAFOs as its economic foundation is looked to as a model for rural economic development.

The impacts of CAFOs are a bit different for each community, but the basic issues are the same. Invariably, some few people in CAFO communities benefit economically, while others

suffer the inherently negative ecological, social, and economic consequences of CAFOs. Perhaps no single issue has been as disruptive of life in rural America as when local proponents and opponents of CAFOs confront each other and the rest of the community is forced to choose sides. Regardless of the ultimate outcomes, communities invariably suffer from these conflicts.

Rural people have the same basic democratic rights as other Americans, including the rights of self-determination and self-defense. These rights are being systematically denied when rural people are told they must rely on so-called experts to decide when their health is threatened – that rural people are incapable of reading scientific reports and drawing their own conclusions. The rights of rural people are being systematically denied when rural people are told they must trust public officials with obvious economic and political ties to CAFOs to protect them from the threats CAFOs inevitable pose to the overall well-being of people in rural communities. We must continue to defend the democratic rights of rural Americas to protect themselves from CAFOs, even as we expand our efforts to refute the current barrage of pro-CAFO propaganda with truth.

## End Notes

<sup>i</sup> Anna Lappe, “Who’s behind the US Farmers and Ranchers Alliance and why it matters,” *Grist*, September, 2011. <http://grist.org/factory-farms/2011-09-26-whos-behind-the-u-s-farmers-ranchers-alliance-and-why-it-m/>

<sup>ii</sup> Food Dialogue to be held by Missouri Farmers Care, *Quincy Journal*, Quincy, IL, July 24, 2013. <http://quincyjournal.com/business-beat/2013/07/21/food-dialogues-to-be-held-by-missouri-farmers-care1374334562/> .

<sup>iii</sup> Breakfast on the Farm, A Michigan State University Extension Program, <http://www.breakfastonthefarm.com/> .

<sup>iv</sup> US Farmers and Ranchers Alliance, *The Food Dialogues*, <http://www.fooddialogues.com/> .

<sup>v</sup> Global Action Network, “How Factory Farms Pollute Air and Water,” <http://www.gan.ca/lifestyle/vegetarian+guide/vegetarians+and+the+environment/how+factory+farming+pollutes+water+and+soil.en.html> .

<sup>vi</sup> IowaWatch.org, “Large Livestock Farms Spread Across Iowa, Threatening Waterways,” <http://iowawatch.org/2013/05/30/large-livestock-farms-spread-across-iowa-threatening-waterways/>

<sup>vii</sup> IowaWatch.org, “Large Livestock Farms....”

<sup>viii</sup> 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>

<sup>ix</sup> USDA Price Spreads from Farmer to Consumer, [www.usda.ers.gov/data-products/price-spreads-from-farm-to-consumer.aspx](http://www.usda.ers.gov/data-products/price-spreads-from-farm-to-consumer.aspx) .

<sup>x</sup> 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> .

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, “Agriculture and Public Health Gateway,” Industrial Food Animal Production, <http://aphg.jhsph.edu/?event=browse.subject&subjectID=43>

<sup>x</sup> 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>

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

<sup>x</sup> 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](http://www.pewtrusts.org/news_room_detail.aspx?id=38438) , full report, <http://www.ncifap.org/> .

<sup>xi</sup> R-CALF USA. “Comments on Agriculture and Antitrust Enforcement Issues in Our 21<sup>st</sup> Century Economy.” Comment to U.S. Department of Justice. December 31, 2009.

<sup>xiii</sup> Nigel Key and William McBride, “The Changing Economics of U.S. Hog Production,” Economic Research Report No. (ERR-52) 45 pp, December 2007.