Top Ten Reasons

for rural communities to be concerned about large scale corporate hog operations

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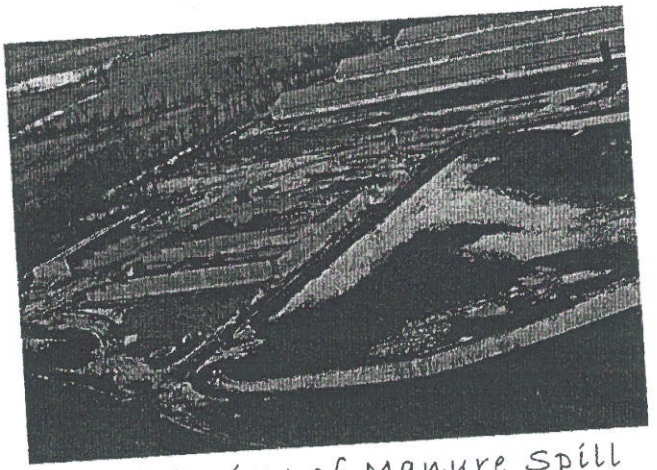
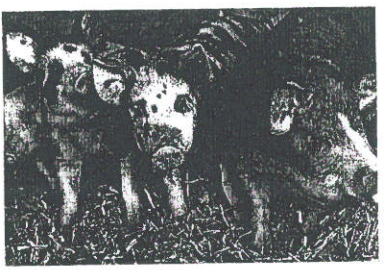


Aerial View of Manure Spill at a Hog CAFO in Illinois, 2001

For more information on corporate hog factories
and other issues surrounding factory farming
including sustainable alternatives,
visit www.factoryfarm.org.



I was recently asked by a rural advocacy group in Missouri to "list some logical reasons why county commissioners and other rural community leaders should be concerned about effects of livestock factories?" I considered it to be a reasonable request and thus developed a list of reasons why I think rural residents should question whether or not they want large-scale, corporate hog farms to locate in their communities.

As I indicate in my response to the request, there is no scientific consensus on this issue. Thus, there is no set of scientific "facts" to either "prove or disprove" the validity of these concerns. There is research to support many of the concerns on my list, even though they cannot be proven. Published proceedings from "An Interdisciplinary Scientific Workshop: Understanding the Impacts of Large-scale Swine Production," edited by Kendall Thu, University of Iowa, is a good starting point in reviewing supporting literature. However, most of the concerns on the list are based primarily on logical reasoning and common sense. Some may dismiss these "logical" concerns as illogical, uninformed, or inconsequential. But, such assessments simply represent different "beliefs," not proven facts or some unique knowledge of reality. The people of rural communities have a right and responsibility to weigh the evidence and logic on both sides of this issue and to make their own decisions.

Admittedly, there are reasonable arguments in favor of locating large-scale corporate hog operations in specific rural communities. They include: (a) we need the jobs, (b) we need the tax base, (c) we don't want to lose our agricultural base, (d) other communities will do it if we don't, (e) we can't stand in the way of progress, (f) consumers want uniform quality that only big operations can supply, (g) big operations can better afford modern pollution prevention technologies, and (h) the opposition is just another case of "not in my backyard," selfish thinking. There are logical responses to each of these arguments. However, rather than argue these points, I have chosen to provide a logical list of reasons why rural communities might be concerned about the location of large-scale corporate hog operations in their areas.

A "top ten list" wasn't chosen just to be cute or catchy. Ten is enough to get the point across, but not so many as to overdo discussion of the issue. Also, I wanted to start at the bottom of my list and work my way to the top.

Concern #10. Hogs stink.

Odor is at the top of the list for many opponents of large-scale hog farms. The most vocal opponents tend to be those affected most directly – those who wake up to the smell of hog manure most every morning. To a hog producer, hog manure may "smell like money," but to the neighbors, it just "smells like hog manure." There are legitimate human health concerns associated with air quality surrounding large hog operations. Thus, the odor problem goes beyond the very real nuisance of living with stench in the air. Odors associated with giant hog farms affect the lives of people for "miles around," not just those on adjoining farms. No one likes living in a community that smells like a cesspool. Few would be willing to stay in, or move into, such a community for any reason other than employment. Odor ranks only 10 on my list because something could possibly be done to mitigate its impacts, such as using odor reducing technologies, compensating those most affected, and restricting location to minimize impacts of the greater community.

Concern #9. The work is not good for people.

A large confinement hog facility is not a pleasant place to work. Known health risks are associated with continuously breathing the air that arises from manure pits in confinement hog facilities. Health problems cost money in lost wages and health care costs. But more important, an unhealthy workplace can destroy peoples' lives. History has proven that people will choose to work in dangerous work environments when they are desperate for jobs. Health risks can be life threatening, so I rank worker safety above odor problems. But as in the case of odor, health problems can be mitigated by protecting workers from the noxious fumes, by limiting exposure, and by keeping people with other health problems out of confinement facilities.

Concern #8. Piling up too much "stuff" in one-place causes problems.

If you spread out the hogs and let hog manure lay where it falls in a pasture, it doesn't bother anyone very much. But if you start collecting it, flushing it, spreading and spraying it around – all normal practices in confinement hog operations – it becomes air pollution. Water pollution also is a symptom of the same basic problem — too much manure in one place. The difference between the lagoon spills in Missouri and North Carolina and the normal runoff from a hog pasture is a simple matter of concentration. When you put a lot of hogs in the same place, you have to collect and store the waste. If it gets into the ground water or gets flushed into streams, it kills fish, clogs streams

In addition, manure on diversified hog farms normally is spread back onto cropland where the feed grain was grown. Most of the nutrients used to grow the crops are returned to the soil. But, when feed grains from specialized crop farms are shipped to distant hog-factories, the nation's future productive capacity is being stacked up and flushed out into places where crops can't grow. We can treat the symptoms – air pollution and water pollution – but the basic problem of piling up too much stuff is inherent within the system of large-scale, concentrated production.

Concern #7. Consumers have little if anything to gain.

Large-scale, corporate hog production is frequently justified to the general public as a more efficient, lower cost, means of producing higher quality pork. The facts of the situation simply do not support such a claim. The average consumer spends just over 10 percent, a dime out of each dollar, of their disposable income for food. About 10 percent, a penny out of the dime, is spent for pork. The costs of live hogs make up only about 35 percent of that penny. The rest goes for processing, packaging, advertising, transportation, and other marketing costs.

Farm record data have shown that costs of large-scale hog operations are only slightly lower than costs of "average" commercial hog producers. Even if production costs were five percent less, about $2/cwt of live hog; the "maximum" savings to consumers would be less than two cents per dollar spent for pork at retail. At best, food costs would be two-tenths of one percent less and consumers on average would spend only "two-one-hundredths of one percent" less for food. Any savings would be lost in rounding error in consumer food cost statistics. With a handful of large hog producers and packers gaining control of the industry, it seems far more likely that pork prices would go up than down as a consequence of further industrialization.

The argument that factory pork would be higher in quality doesn't hold either. Pork would be more uniform because it would all come from the same basic genetic stock, as is currently the case with chickens. However, consumers have different tastes and preferences – different perceptions of quality. Making all pork "the same" would not necessarily please more consumers. Greater profits for producers and processors, not lower costs or higher quality, is the driving force behind the current trend toward industrial hog production. The only ones who really need to shave another penny or two of cost of production costs are those who are trying to export more pork into highly competitive world markets. That doesn't include many hog farmers or port consumers. So, why should the general public support industrial hog production?

Concern #6. Continuing regulatory problems are inevitable.

Without regulations, big hog operations will impose costs on their neighbors – air pollution, water pollution, and others — that are not part of the historic costs of producing hogs. It will cost money for hog factories to deal with "externalities" such as air and water pollution. No "bottom-line" driven hog operation will incur those costs unless they are forced to do so by government regulations – federal, state, or local.

Family farmers are people with human feelings and values, and most feel some sense of responsibility to their communities and the environment. Family farmers at least have personal incentives to be stewards of the environment and good neighbors, regardless of how they choose to behave. Public corporations have no such incentives. They are not people. Corporations have no heart or soul. Stockholders often are so detached from their investments they don't know or care what stocks they own – just as long as they make money. Local managers and workers may be good people who really care about the community, but when it comes to keeping their job, they must put profits and growth ahead of community. Professed corporate support of local communities, by necessity, can be nothing more than another strategy for profit and growth. Thus, government regulation and continual conflict are an inherent fact of corporate life.

Concern #5. Hog factories destroy public confidence in agriculture.

Over the decades, family farmers have built up a vast treasure of public confidence and good will. Many people in the cities either grew up on farms or have parents or other close relatives who either are or were family farmers. The "farm family" conjured up images of people who are hard working, honest, dependable, trustworthy, caring, and responsible. These images have been a valuable source of wealth for farmers - although not widely recognized as such.

Farmers have been awarded special privileges, exemptions, and variances under a whole host of public policies — from taxation to environmental regulations — because they were trusted to behave in the public interest. Support of "family farms" has been an important part of the rhetoric of every farm bill that has passed congress. Farmers have also enjoyed a special status "as people," apart from any monetary benefits. They have been respected and trusted. However, bad publicity surrounding large-scale, corporate hog production is using up the farmer's stock of public confidence and good will at an alarming rate. Negative stories have appeared on every major television net

work over the past few years. When Ms. Magazine runs a feature article on the ills of corporate hog farming, as they did in a recent issue, we can conclude that the story has just about made the full circuit of public opinion shapers. Family farms will be paying for this loss of public trust for decades, if not forever.

Concern #4. Future of the community is turned over to outside interests.

Rural people need to take charge of their own destinies if they expect to sustain a desirable quality of community life for themselves, their children, and future generations of rural Americans. Quality of life is about much more than just creating more jobs and making more money. Quality of life is also about positive moral and social values and being responsible caretakers of the community as a place. Sure, people need jobs and need to make a decent living. But, jobs and high wages didn't save the cities from decline and decay and jobs won't save rural communities either. When an apparent solution to a problem comes from someone else, from outside, you can just about bet that the benefits will be going to someone else from outside as well.

Some rich and powerful outsiders have their own problems, and they have their eyes on rural communities as places to solve them. Sparse population, trusting people, and lack of jobs in rural areas are seen as ideal opportunities. They are looking for someplace to "dump stuff." An Industrial society creates a lot of "trash," whether in the form of garbage, toxic chemicals, or hog manure. Most "outsiders" promoting rural development schemes have something they need to "dump." Jobs just aren't enough compensation for turning a community into a "dump." Rural people need to take control of their own destiny and build the kinds of communities in which their children and their children's children will choose to live and grow. The solutions to the problems of rural Americans are in the hands, hearts, and minds of rural people themselves, not in outside investment and corporate control.

Concern #3. The decision making process can rip communities apart.

The process of decision making may be more important than the decision itself. Anyone who has been a part of a family has experienced this first hand. The memory of an act that triggered a family feud has long since faded, but the feud goes on. Feuds result from a loss of confidence and trust, regardless of the context within which the loss takes place. The large-scale, corporate hog farm issue is one of the most contentious issues to confront rural America in recent history.

The social fabric of rural communities has been ripped apart by controversy surrounding the introduction of large-scale, corporate hog operations. There seems to be no middle ground. Some people seem determined to bring in the big hog operations, by almost any means, and others seem just as committed to keep them out, by almost any means. Almost everyone eventually seems to feel obligated to take sides. The larger question in such communities is not whether the hog farms come in or stay out, but can the community ever heal the wound left by the fight? A healthy, unified community can deal with almost any problem, including a large-scale corporate hog farm on the outskirts of town. A sick, bitterly divided community is incapable of much more than survival, regardless of its other advantages and opportunities. The future of rural America depends on communities of people being able to work together for their common good. The divisiveness of the decision making process, presumably, could be avoided. But, the consequences of failing to do so are so destructive that it ranks near the top of my list.

Concern #2. Hog factories degrade the productive capacities of rural people.

Factories "use up" people. Assembly line work is "non-thinking" work. When you work on an assembly line, you simply do what you are told as fast as you can for as long as you can. I know. I have been there. Large-scale hog operations may not be assembly lines, but the principle is the same. Big hog operators do not want people who know anything about raising hogs. They want people who can be trained to do what they are told to do without thinking. An experienced hog farmer might start thinking, asking questions, and mess up the process. Hog factories, like other factories, are looking for people who are dependable, who know how to carry out orders, and will work hard for a little money.

On balance, large-scale, industrial hog operations destroy more jobs than they create. A driving force behind industrialization is to substitute capital and technology for labor and management – to make it possible for fewer people to produce more. Large-scale hog operations concentrate the jobs created in one place and call it economic development. The jobs lost elsewhere are ignored or denied. The numbers of independent hog farmers displaced elsewhere will be greater than the number of jobs created in new large scale hog operations. Hog factories replace more independent hog farmers with fewer assembly line workers.

Other kinds of factories have come to rural America in the past. When these factories have found people in other regions, or in other countries, who would work even harder for less, they moved on. Corporately owned factories have no roots. They leave behind a workforce that doesn't know how to do anything other than what they are told. Intelligent, thinking, capable, independent people are transformed into detached, non-thinking people who may be psychologically incapable of earning a living without depending on someone else to tell them what to do. Our cities currently are plagued with such people — people whose capacities have been degraded by factories long since gone. It just doesn't seem to make sense to do the same thing to rural people. When we replace independent, family hog farmers with hog factories we are degrading the most valuable resource rural areas have to support future development – rural people.

Concern #1. Tomorrow's problems are disguised as today's solution.

My number one concern regarding large-scale, corporate hog operations is that rural communities will see them as "the solution" to today's problems without seeing them as a potential "source" of problems for tomorrow. Maybe there are some communities so desperate for jobs that it makes sense to take the risks. Maybe they feel they have to do something today to give them a chance to do something better tomorrow. But, hog factories are a short-run solution, at best, that may create more long run problems than they solve today. Low-wage, assembly-line-like jobs should be viewed as a stop gap strategy suitable only for communities with no other options. Sooner or later non-thinking jobs will be done somewhere else on the globe, where people will work harder for less money and are accustomed to doing whatever they are told – by those who have no other options. In the longer run, all non-thinking jobs will be done using computers and robots – not by people anywhere.

The real opportunities for people to lead successful lives in the future will be in "thinking" work. The human mind is uniquely capable of complex thought. Almost anyone is "smarter" than a computer. But, people need to develop their unique human abilities to think. We need to accept the responsibility for thinking and for creating thinking jobs for ourselves and for others. As long as rural people think their problems are solved, or will be solved by someone else, they see no incentive to begin doing the things they need to do to ensure the future of their community.

The primary advantages for rural areas in the twenty-first century will be the unique qualities of life associated with open spaces, clean air, clean water, scenic landscapes, and communities of energetic, thinking, caring people. Communities that sacrifice these long run advantages for short run economic gains may have a difficult time surviving in the new century.

Thus, my number one concern is that large-scale, corporate hog operations are tomorrow's problem disguised as today's solution. They may keep rural people from doing the things that need to be done today to ensure the future of their communities. Large-scale, corporate hog operations will not create communities where our children and their children will choose to live and grow. Communities with a future must take positive actions today to ensure a desirable quality of life for themselves, their children, and rural children of future generations.

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