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► These three photos of CAFOs or confinement animal feeding operations all have common threads - congestion, antibiotic use, waste build-up and lack of access to pasture.

CAFOs VS Rural Communities



All photos - Touch the Soil

The only thing promoters and opponents of large-scale confinement animal feeding operations (CAFOs) agree on is that CAFOs create conflicts in rural communities. CAFO promoters accuse opponents of being emotional, uninformed, radicals, opposed to modern agriculture and to progress in general. Opponents accuse CAFO promoters of being insensitive, self-seeking bullies, unconcerned about the rights of 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.

Promoters of CAFOs tend to target communities desperate for economic development, although they may later branch out into surrounding areas. Local leaders are told 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.

Initially, most opponents of CAFOs are concerned about odors. However, as they learn more, they become aware of other environmental risks – pollution of streams and aquifers with biological wastes. Then human health risks associated with air and water pollution. They also become aware of concerns about the higher risks of E-coli O157:H7 and antibiotic-resistant bacteria, including MRSA, and even "mad cow" disease associated with CAFOs.

When local opponents communicate with those in existing CAFO communities, they become concerned about the potential impacts of CAFOs on the overall quality of life in their communi-

ties. 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.

Today, 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. Research consistently shows that the social and economic quality of life is better in communities characterized by small, diversified family farms.

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 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 reviewed 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 environmen- ►



tal problems associated with large animal confinement operations have become widely recognized.”

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.”

The USDA, a proponent of CAFOs, responded to the draft report by suggesting that the conclusions of existing research 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.”

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. 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.

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.”

The preponderance of science 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.

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. Current environmental and health regulations are inadequate to protect rural areas. 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. 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. ■ Copyright©2007 John Ikerd