

Indeed CAFOs Have Their Critics

In the previous column in this series we looked at the development of concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) from the perspective of farmers who at each step undertook the changes in order to stabilize or increase farm income while at the same time reducing risk.

While the development of CAFOs has mostly been greeted positively by many farmers, they have not been without critics. Much of the criticism comes from the indirect effects of the shift from a decentralized, small-scale production system like we had in the early part of the twentieth century.

The effects fall into two rough categories: market power and environmental impacts.

Small producers who have resisted the pressure to embrace the industrialized production of hog CAFOs, in particular, have complained that the research and advertising sponsored with funds from the pork check-off have been oriented toward solving the problems of the large producers and have paid little attention to the issues faced by the smaller producer. The same complaint has been lodged against university research.

Another problem faced by small producers is price discovery. With more and more animals under contract, the number of buying stations has dwindled leaving independent producers with fewer markets and those that do exist are further away.

Others complain about CAFOs because of environmental issues: dust, odor, water pollution, and the prophylactic use of antibiotics in animal feed.

Let's start with odor. Hog manure always smells. We remember Sunday trips on two lane roads through the countryside. We could always tell when we passed a farm with a hog waller. It smelled like hog manure. The decomposition of the manure in that setting was aerobic.

Pass a hog CAFO today and what one smells is a combination of ammonia and hydrogen sulfide – the result of an anaerobic reaction that takes place in the pit or the lagoon where the manure is stored in large quantities. In some cases the manure is stored for nearly a year before it is spread on the land.

In the 50s and 60s most people who lived in the country expected animal odors as a part of life, but for the most part the odors were transient and not likely to take one's breath away. Though farmers might not always like the way a neighbor farmed, farmers stood up for each other when encroaching suburbanites began to complain about farm smells.

That all changes in the 90s when the number of confinement buildings began to multiply in rural communities. Transient odors became chronic smells that prevented people from holding barbecue dinners and outdoor graduation parties for their children. The nature of the smell changed from that of the aerobic decomposition of hog manure to the results of an anaerobic reaction: hydrogen sulfide and ammonia combined with that piggy smell that clings to every pore in one's body.

Suddenly communities in Iowa and Minnesota saw grain farmers going to township meetings

complaining about an application to build another hog building in the neighborhood. The bib overall code of farmer solidarity had been broken. In states that allowed it, townships and counties began to establish their own setback requirements as well as rules governing the application of hog manure.

To be fair, many large-scale hog producers tried their best to minimize the odor problems. With this goal in mind, today, there were/are as many purveyors of hog-odor-reducing nostrums traveling the country roads as there were snake oil salesmen in the 1890s. The problem is none of them to date have worked very well and some of them were very expensive.

That does not mean that there will never be a scientifically based means to reduce the odor problem. Iowa State University and others are engaged in multi-million dollar projects that address the odor issue.

The Iowa State project was recently singled-out by some in Congress as a pork barrel project, no pun intended. Of course, the hundreds of thousands of people downwind from CAFO operations don't think the funding of odor projects qualifies as "pork" if pork barrel funding has come to mean a pet project that affects relatively few of a Congressperson's constituency.

The staunchest of CAFO critics generally do not support odor-reduction projects and other public investments designed to ameliorate perceived CAFO environmental problems, believing that solving such problems would encourage their further growth.

People outside the hog industry have difficulty understanding why their doctor is resistant to prescribe an antibiotic when their child has the flu. The doctor says she wants to reduce the change of the development of antibiotic-resistance in the child.

At the same time many confinement operations are using low levels of antibiotics in the animal feed to prevent the spread of illness and increase weight gain. Some of these antibiotics are released into the environment and raise the potential of the development of antibiotic resistant pathogens.

Potential and, in some cases, actual manure contamination of water bodies with pathogens and nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus are problems that have long plagued CAFO operators. State governments are increasingly scrutinizing and strengthening manure handling and disposal systems. Critics complain that few manure handling systems approach the waste treatment systems required of incorporated communities of humans.

The problem of developing a coherent set of policies is complicated by producers who are resistant to changing a profitable system, while there are those among the critics who would like to see the end of all industrialized meat production. △



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