



## **GUEST OPINION**

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### **DNR scoring system fails to protect Iowans' air, water, health**

**By James Merchant and David Osterberg**

The “Master Matrix” is the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) scoring system designed to bring county government into the process of locating large concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs).

It is supposed to protect neighbors and the environment but has proven to be an ineffective device that gives county supervisors very little to do or say. And it ties the hands of the DNR as well.

More than 97 percent of proposed facilities get approved, even when counties object because of community complaints and/or adverse environmental impacts on vulnerable lands and waterways.

Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement (Iowa CCI) and Food & Water Watch have petitioned the DNR to revise and update the Master Matrix to give local communities a real role in approving or rejecting CAFOs. The first chance of taking up this detailed revision is Sept. 18 when the Environmental Protection Commission next meets.

There is now widespread concern in rural Iowa about CAFO growth and impact. Seventeen Iowa counties have taken action similar to Dickinson County Board of Supervisors asking the Governor and Legislature “to address the failings of the Master Matrix to protect the air, water, health, ‘quality of life’ and economic interests of the citizens we were elected to represent.”

In their petition, the Dickinson County supervisors seek a moratorium on any CAFO construction permits “until such time as

corrective new legislation regarding the Master Matrix can be adopted.”

This is not the first time counties have shown their displeasure. Three of them went to the Iowa Supreme Court only to lose against the state CAFO siting law. Just two years ago, 23 counties responded to a survey of county supervisors stating they were unhappy with the present method of locating CAFOs.

In 2002, we were members of a study group from Iowa State University College of Agriculture and the University of Iowa College of Public Health tasked by Governor Tom Vilsack to address public health and environmental impacts of CAFOs.

Our consensus executive summary cited scientific evidence of harm to humans from CAFO emissions, found that specific regulatory action was warranted, that methods were available to mitigate CAFO emissions, and that statewide spatial planning and local siting guidelines were needed.

While the Master Matrix incorporated some potentially harmful impacts of CAFOs, local control clearly lost out to an industry pushing for largely unfettered growth.

In 2001, before the Master Matrix, there were 722 large DNR-permitted CAFOs of all types, 93 percent of which were hog CAFOs. Today, there are over 3,000 large, DNR-permitted CAFOs. But the real number of CAFOs of all sizes, according to DNR’s 2016 report to the EPA, is over 14,000 with over 5,000 “new” CAFOs recently identified only via satellite imagery.

In the last 15 years, many new studies have documented even more adverse impacts of CAFOs: on water quality, impaired waterways, fish kills, and a substantial contribution to the “dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico.

CAFOs have a detrimental effect on the public’s health including antibiotic resistance and disease, epidemic and pandemic influenza, and asthma and airway obstruction. There are adverse impacts on quality-of-life

among CAFO neighbors, negative economic impacts on land values, and a redirection of rural development and rural community viability.

The entire process of approving animal confinement facilities needs to be changed. The petition by Iowa CCI and Food & Water Watch offers state regulators an opportunity to engage county supervisors and their constituents in a statewide dialogue leading to fair and sustainable policy.

***James Merchant is Professor Emeritus of Public Health and Medicine, and Dean Emeritus, College of Public Health, at the University of Iowa. David Osterberg is Professor Emeritus of Occupational and Environmental Health at the University of Iowa, and co-founder of the nonpartisan Iowa Policy Project in Iowa City.***