



The Iowa Policy Project

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NEWS RELEASE

The Explosion of CAFOs in Iowa and Its Impact on Water Quality and Public Health

IOWA CITY, Iowa (Jan. 25, 2018) — Iowa should consider major policy changes including a moratorium on new concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) that pose growing environmental and health challenges.

A new Iowa Policy Project report from two health and environmental experts points to the explosion of CAFO numbers in the state — four times as many large CAFOs as in 2001 — with over 10,000 of all sizes, while state officials have rejected serious attempts to control their impacts.

“There is strong science behind the stories we hear constantly about problems caused by this industry. We sorely need more restrictive legislation,” said David Osterberg, IPP’s lead environmental researcher and professor emeritus of occupational and environmental health at the University of Iowa.

Osterberg co-authored the report with Dr. James Merchant, founding dean emeritus of the College of Public Health at the U of I. The report is available at www.iowapolicyproject.org.

Their report notes findings in vast research that documents the impact of CAFO air emissions on neighbors’ health, finding significant increases in childhood asthma, adult asthma, airway obstruction, and irritant-linked eye and upper airway symptoms.

Water quality — a stated priority of Iowa lawmakers — is being degraded by livestock production and goes unchecked. Manure leaks and spills are associated with fish kills, nitrate and ammonia pollution, antibiotics, hormones, bacterial contamination, algae blooms, water quality impairments, closed beaches and are a major contributor to the “dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico.

Besides health, environmental and quality-of-life impacts, they note several studies have found depressed property values of as much as 20 to 40 percent near animal feeding operations.

Meanwhile, the livestock industry intends and promotes business as usual.

“Not only happy with the Master Matrix, the industry is fortified by a new anti-nuisance suit law that prevents or severely limits real nuisance damages and seeks to eliminate from consideration evidence-based adverse health effects research,” Merchant and Osterberg wrote.

To control and eventually diminish these negative impacts, and sustain long-term farm animal production in Iowa, the authors suggest consideration of six options:

- reforming and revising the Master Matrix,

- passing a moratorium on new CAFOs,
- land covenants and other local legal strategies to limit local CAFO growth,
- challenging the constitutionality of anti-nuisance suit and ag-gag legislation,
- legislation to encourage renewable energy production from animal waste, and
- funding communicable disease and sustainable agriculture programs.

According to the report, Iowa has added nearly 500 new or expanded state-permitted CAFOs annually over the last decade, fueled by Iowa’s robust export market for slaughtered hogs. These exports are expected to grow to meet demand from China in particular — driving more pork processing plants and CAFO development.

“Iowa’s lax ‘Master Matrix’ process for CAFO siting is broken — 97 percent of requested permits are approved — even in fragile karst topography, over objections of county supervisors in now 20 counties, and despite the protests of neighbors and citizen groups,” the authors wrote. “All have been disenfranchised by the considerable clout of the livestock industry.

“A tipping point has been reached. Rural Iowans have every reason to be concerned.”

The report is the latest of many produced by IPP about the impact of agricultural industry on clean air, clean water and health in the state since the organization began in 2001.

The Iowa Policy Project is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that offers research and analysis on public policy issues in energy and the environment, economic opportunity and budget and tax policy. Reports are available at www.iowapolicyproject.org.

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