

Do Not Throw The Baby Out With The Bath Water

by Arlan DeBlicek

Regulating corporate hog farms is one of the top issues confronting the Iowa Legislature in 1999. Two key Iowa Supreme Court decisions and a new governor favoring local control will reheat the debate over who will control the regulatory process. Federal, state, and county governments want control over regulating hog farms. The Federal Environmental Protection Agency claims oversight control under the guise of Clean Air and Water Acts. Iowa claims control because it has a vested interest in the welfare of its people and the hog industry as a viable revenue source. Many citizens want local counties in control because they believe they have the most at stake. To keep regulations standard, science-based, and minimal in number, the State of Iowa should control the process.

Those opposed to large hog operations cite the preservation of family farms, protection of water quality and community health, as reasons to control large "factory" hog farms. On the surface, these are rational and valid concerns. However, out-of-state influences, such as the Sierra Club, have degraded sound fact-finding quests for answers with emotional sensationalism. Opponents argue that the size of an operation is directly proportional to the harm it causes to society, when in fact, the opposite could be true. Regulation formulated from this emotional appeal for justice is not only expensive, but risks one of Iowa's strongest revenue generating industries. When formulating solutions on this issue, emotions need to yield to a science-based, rational, problem solving process. The state of Iowa is the best entity to refocus this issue, and to rationally evaluate what is needed to promote both a healthy economy and society, at the least cost.

The size and number of family farms is affected more by world competition than by public policy. U.S. agricultural products must compete on the world market where price competition is stiff and substitutes are many. World competition, through technology, is causing economies of scale to increase. As a result, farmers are having to specialize and increase production volume in order to compete. Corporate hog farms are a manifestation of this, not the cause. World competition will dictate size and the number of hog farms. Regulations may slow the trend, but not without a price. This price can make Iowa's pork producers unable to compete and place this multibillion dollar revenue stream at risk. It is better that the state ensure science-based regulations are truly needed to protect public safety, and that they are applied equally. This will do more to save family farms in Iowa than attempting to create a protected class through regulation.

Iowa's hog population has remained relatively the same for the past 20 years¹. What has changed is the area used to produce them. Confinement technology has contracted the area needed to produce the same number of animals. It is this density that concerns citizens about water safety. The heaviest hog population in the country is in Duplin County, North Carolina². It has experienced a 500% growth rate in hog numbers since 1980, and according to the North Carolina

Department of Environment and Natural Resources, there has been no change in water quality³. Research is showing size and technology may be reducing, not increasing, the risks to society. Markets force the efficient use of all resources. Effluent is a resource better controlled in confinement facilities than on pastures. By storing effluent, producers are able to measure the nutrient contents, use it to produce other crops, and reduce the input costs of those other crops. Pasture lots can not store, measure, or efficiently use this resource. Most pasture lots are on hills because productive lands are used for row crops. Pasture production allows rain to wash pasture effluent into creeks and watersheds.

Research into the cause and effect relationships of potential industry-specific health hazards are in their infancy. Most controversies center around aerosol pathogens and heavy gasses produced from the storage of manure. Some people become ill from the odor and conclude it must either be from an aerosol pathogen on a particle of dust, or from gasses such as ammonia or methane. All are plausible, but unproven. Again, research needs to establish a link before burdensome regulations are placed on an industry. Producers are at ground zero; if research links ailments to pork production, producers will be among the first to propose changes. Prevention is generally cheaper than litigation and treatment. The Federal Environmental Protection Agency is trying to regulate the industry from the health argument. Science-based regulation could come from the federal government, but it is an extra bureaucratic layer. The state, with a vested interest in both the people and the industry, can accomplish the same goals at less cost.

The hog industry is a multibillion dollar industry that must compete in the world market. This is particularly important to Iowa because it is, as it has been for at least the past decade, the largest producer of pork in the United States. Iowa has a relative advantage in producing pork however, this advantage is in jeopardy if Iowa bows to emotionally charged public pressure. Iowa needs to rely on sound science in establishing a need for regulation, and must apply that regulation equally in order to keep pork production a strong and viable source of revenue. Iowa needs to balance public safety with a fertile environment for growth. To allow local emotional sentiment to control the regulatory process will inevitably invite regulations that "throws the baby out with the bath water."

1. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, U.S. DEP'T OF COMMERCE, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES (111TH ed. 1991 and the 117TH ed. 1997).
2. Jeanne Bernick, *Black Beauty*, HOGS TODAY, Oct. 98, at 6-7
3. *Id* at 7.

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