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Serious Questions on CAFO Growth Study: Hog Confinements Offer Few Plusses, Substantial Costs

AMES, Iowa (Thursday, Oct. 18, 2007) — A new study examining local impacts of increasing hog confinement operations across Iowa raises questions about their local development benefits.

“In certain parts of Iowa, the lost opportunities may have been substantial,” said Jan Flora, lead author of the new report for the nonpartisan Iowa Policy Project (IPP). “Hog confinement growth in the 1990s may have hampered the chances for communities to prosper with tourism and recreation, and in making their towns the kind of places people choose for retirement.”

The report by Flora, an Iowa State University professor, and three other researchers comes as environmental concerns are pushing some to seek changes in state law governing concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFOs, particularly for hog production.

“After reading Jan Flora’s paper it’s easy to see why citizens of small towns that really need economic development sometimes get angry and even protest when they hear a CAFO is moving into the area,” said David Osterberg, IPP executive director.

Flora’s data show economic, social and human development impacts of CAFOs are, at best, modest. He said other research in Iowa and neighboring states indicates that although growth in livestock sales has a modest positive effect on county income growth, development of outdoor recreational amenities contributes more than five times as much.

“Because of the odor of concentrated hog manure, and the negative impacts of hog CAFOs on surface water quality, recreational amenities and CAFOs cannot exist cheek by jowl,” Flora said. “Our results show clearly that CAFOs are negatively associated with surface water quality in Iowa and downstream.”

With decades of population declines in farming-dependent areas, and 20 years of farmers turning to industrial livestock production in response to consolidation in agriculture, many state and local leaders have turned to industrial livestock production and processing as an economic development strategy.

Hog CAFOs and Sustainability: The Impact on Local Development and Water Quality in Iowa

By Jan L. Flora, Qiaoli (Lily) Chen,
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www.iowapolicyproject.org

Flora said that raises questions of the sustainability of such development — whether rural communities can support it over the long term — and the specific impacts on people and amenities.

“Policy makers need to ask whether this kind of development will hurt or help educational levels and financial well-being for individuals and the community. Will this kind of development improve or hinder civic engagement? How about environmental impacts?” Flora said.

The authors noted that social scientists and ecologists see three essential elements to sustainable growth: social equality and well-being, economic viability, and environmental soundness. They found:

- ***Social equality and well-being.*** Counties with expanding hog numbers in CAFOs experienced significant private-sector employment growth — but not population retention, in-migration, employment of residents, or increased school enrollments.

“Despite more jobs, it doesn’t bring growth in people or school enrollments in the county where the hog expansion occurs,” Flora said.

“The only notable quality-of-life change is that with CAFO expansion, there is growth in the proportion of adults without a high-school education. We did not find, as others have found, that increased hogs in CAFOs depressed social measures such as civic engagement, crime and home ownership.”

- ***Economic viability.*** Hog CAFO expansion is associated with reduced core poverty, but largely unrelated to changes in median county income levels, housing values, and the share of near-poor households.

“Whether we measured economic development in terms of growth in retail sales, pay by local firms, or by an increase in the number of firms in the county, the effect of hog CAFO expansion was anemic,” Flora said.

“We also noted the geographic concentration of hog production over the last 25 years has not generated local economic development. And, one consequence of concentration in the ag sector means that integrated or contract-feeding CAFOs often do not purchase inputs locally.”

- ***Environmental soundness.*** Finally, manure production from hog CAFOs strongly related to three of the four contamination measures: manure spills, fish kills and impaired waterways.

“Pollution from CAFOs complicates efforts to capitalize on amenities such as bathing, swimming and fishing in Iowa’s lakes and streams,” Flora said. “Surface water pollution of Iowa’s rivers and streams has important national implications as well: The state of Iowa is the largest up-country contributor to hypoxia in the Gulf of Mexico, and the majority of that pollution comes from agriculture.”

The Iowa Policy Project is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and policy analysis organization based in Mount Vernon, with its principal office in Iowa City. IPP reports on budget issues, employment trends, energy and the environment are available to the public at www.iowapolicyproject.org.