



Big livestock farms breed controversy in rural IL

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By Associated Press

BUCKHART, Ill. (AP) — Life seems bucolic in rural Illinois, where farmsteads dot country roads, fields of corn and soybeans stretch for miles and families carry on agricultural traditions that span generations.

Robert Young was born into this life 68 years ago on the same central Illinois farm where he tends a small herd of cattle, where a weathered house and outbuildings serve as reminders of his long struggle to make ends meet. There's also something new — a 29,000-square-foot barn where Young fattens 3,600 hogs for one of the nation's largest pork processors, a venture he embraced several years ago hoping to stay afloat and someday retire.

"The economy tightened up and we were struggling," said Young, who also had a small dairy herd until this spring. So when other hog farmers told him he could make more money with less risk, he took the leap.

But he learned a hard lesson. Few things divide rural communities like the supersized livestock farms that quickly are dominating the industry and challenging the traditional notion of farming.

Across the country, neighbors are clashing with neighbors over concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFOs, where animals are confined to barns or outdoor pens. Some of the largest can hold thousands of cattle or tens of thousands of hogs and generate more waste than many cities, prompting complaints that gases are causing health problems and that manure runoff pollutes waterways and wells. In Illinois, there are thousands of CAFOs, with applications pending for dozens more.

"I'm hesitant to call it a farm," said Curt Davis, among several of Young's neighbors around Buckhart, about 13 miles east of Springfield, who unsuccessfully sued to stop his CAFO. "I refer to it as a factory because I believe that's really what it is."

He said neighbors worry about odors, property values and the potential for health and pollution problems from the manure stored in an almost 1 million-gallon pit under Young's barn and periodically injected into nearby cropland, but would not talk about specific complaints in detail because of the lawsuit. But Davis, who lives about 1½ miles from the barn, said residents also fret because there is virtually no way to stop Young — or other livestock farmers — from expanding.

Although Young's farm is modest by CAFO standards, he is considering doubling its size, which he technically could do every two years under Illinois law.

The same thing worries residents in western Illinois, where several proposed hog confinements have sparked heated debates over how big is too big.

"All of us love where we live and, without being tree huggers, are environmentalists," said Ramona Cook, who lives with her elderly parents on their McDonough County farm and fought a proposed hog confinement that would have handled up to 18,000 animals. "The old way of farming is a beloved occupation and such a tradition, but 18,000 hogs is beyond all comprehension." That Illinois Department of Agriculture last month closed that application after the farmer failed to meet approval conditions, though it's considering applications for many other projects across Illinois.

But livestock farmers say there is another side to the story that often gets missed amid the emotion.

The industry has been consolidating quickly, with fewer but larger farms producing more of the milk and meat that makes its way to groceries. In 2011, for example, about 62 percent of all hogs in the U.S. were raised on farms with 5,000 head or more and just over 50 percent of all milk cows were in operations with greater than 1,000 animals, according to a U.S. Department of Agriculture report. Many, like Young, now have contracts with large livestock processors that supply the animals and feed, while farmers supply the land, barns and labor in return for a steady income and less personal risk.

"The name of the game is we needed to get bigger to be competitive," said John Hagenbuch, a third-generation farmer near Utica.

When he finished college with a degree in swine management, he soon discovered the farm where his father and uncle had about 100 sows

and farmed more than 1,000 acres couldn't support another family. So he and his wife, Kate, built two barns that house 2,400 hogs apiece and now are doubling the operation, where they raise breeding stock for other farms.

"We're not trying to be Tyson Foods," said Kate Hagenbuch, sitting in the barn office while her three young children colored pictures. "It's something we hope we're doing right for these guys someday."

What's more, she said, farmers "drink the same water and breathe the same air" as their neighbors, so have an incentive to be responsible.

Underground pits or outdoor lagoons can hold millions of gallons of manure, which periodically is spread as fertilizer on cropland at controlled rates to prevent groundwater contamination or runoff into waterways. Farmers say that they save money on the cost of commercial fertilizer by using the manure from their CAFOs on their crops.

Most CAFOs operate responsibly and it's often the smaller, older farms that have problems, said Bruce Yurdin, who manages the field operation section in the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency's water bureau. Still, there have been some notable exceptions.

In 2001, a dairy near the small town of Elmwood, outside Peoria — which was under court orders to keep its manure lagoon from overflowing — pumped 2 million gallons of waste into a ravine. The mess ran into a nearby pond and into a creek, killing thousands of fish. In 2009, an estimated 200,000 gallons of manure spilled from a holding pond at an eastern Illinois hog farm into a nearby creek, killing more than 110,000 fish over 19 miles. The farm last year agreed to pay more than \$81,000 in fines to the state to settle the case.

Yurdin estimates there are 3,500 livestock farms large enough to be called CAFOs but isn't sure. Neither the EPA nor agriculture department has an exact total because Illinois did not start regulating livestock farm construction until 1996. The agriculture department oversees CAFO approval; the state Environmental Protection Agency regulates pollution after farms are built.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office has said the EPA should develop an effective way to regulate air emissions from the farms, which studies show can cause illnesses at high concentrations. Meantime, the agency is trying to hold polluters accountable under the Clean Water Act, though it decided this month against requiring CAFO operators to directly report information on farm operations to the agency, which environmental groups said would help focus pollution-control efforts.

CAFO opponents say they also worry about the concentration of farms in some areas and that counties and towns have no authority to deny them or demand tighter controls than those written into state law.

"Where do you draw the line? Unfortunately, there are no good answers because there are no limits in state regulations," said Stacy James, a water resources specialist at Prairie Rivers Network, an Illinois environmental advocacy group.

Young said he's not sorry he built his hog barn, which began operating in 2009, even though he figures it will be another 10 years before he can pay off the barn and his legal bills and start turning a profit. By then, he'll be pushing 80.

But he does lament that some neighbors still won't talk to him, including former friends whose driveways he used to plow in the winter, just to be nice.

"I reconciled with ones that will but there are several that still won't acknowledge me," he said. "I'm not going to hold any grudges."



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