

By [Leslie Renken](#) of the Journal Star

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Concern about Big Sandy Creek drives group in its protest of hog farm

Residents who formed Save Our Sandy fear creek would be negatively affected by proposed facility

SECOND OF THREE PARTS

It's only about 15 miles long and just deep enough to float a canoe, but the Big Sandy Creek has a lot of devotees.

Flowing through northern Marshall County just south of the LaSalle and Putnam County lines, the Big Sandy isn't convenient to any large cities, but a number of nature-loving folks have chosen to make their homes along its banks because of the natural beauty of the area.

It's a haven some fear is threatened.

[Last March](#), residents learned of a large hog confinement facility trying to locate on farmland 3.5 miles northwest of Wenona, just one-third mile north of Big Sandy Creek. Alarmed residents formed a group called [SOS, Save Our Sandy](#), to fight the facility. In October they learned the Illinois Department of Agriculture granted tentative approval for the project. Construction could begin this spring.

"In all of Illinois, in all of the flatness of Illinois, why did they pick a place that is going to negatively impact one of the most beautiful places in the state?" said SOS member Steve Clanin. He and other members voiced their concerns last fall at Clanin's home, which is about two miles from the proposed hog facility. "It's almost like they went out and said, 'Let's put it in the most offensive place.' "

Members of SOS are a diverse group of farmers, businessmen and outdoorsmen. Some are concerned about potential air pollution emanating from the factory farm, a 20,000-pig-farrowing facility owned by Sandy Creek Lane LLC and managed by VMC Management Corp. of Williamsburg, Iowa. Many are also concerned about the health of the stream.

"I would rate it in the top 10 best streams in all of Illinois," said Wayne Herndon, fisheries biologist for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. "The Big Sandy is one of those streams that has the highest rating as far as the fish population that inhabits it, and the aquatic insects that inhabit it ... high diversity indicates that even the most sensitive fish and aquatic insects are able to survive. It's not a typical situation, especially here in northeast Illinois."

The Big Sandy begins just northwest of Wenona and winds through farmland before feeding into the Illinois River near Henry. It's home to more than 20 fish species, including darter, hog sucker and smallmouth bass, said Herndon. SOS members, many of whom enjoy fishing and floating the stream, fear the Big Sandy could be degraded by spills and runoff when manure is applied to surrounding farmland.

Manure production

The Sandy Creek Lane LLC facility could produce as much as 10 million gallons of manure a year, said veterinarian Nic Rippel during the public meeting on the facility in Wenona on April 17. Rippel, a native of Toluca who now works in Iowa, is the permit applicant for the project. Sandy Creek Lane LLC is designed with waste holding tanks beneath the buildings housing the animals. Many new facilities are using covered tanks rather than outdoor earthen lagoons, which are more subject to the whims of Mother Nature — unusually heavy rains can lead to unintended runoff and dilute the fertilizing properties in the manure, a valuable product to farmers. Curt Zehr, a rural Washington hog farmer who also plants crops, estimates the manure his pigs produce saves him between \$100 to \$150 an acre in fertilizer costs.

The covered tanks Sandy Creek Lane LLC is building are large enough to contain the waste produced during one year's time. After harvest, and occasionally in the spring, the manure will be pumped onto neighboring farmland, most of which is owned by Mike Salz, the farmer selling land for the new facility. In its nutrient management plan, Sandy Creek Lane LLC has stated that the manure will be cut 6 to 12 inches into the soil as it is applied, an extra step that's not required by law. Not only does incorporation minimize odor and reduce runoff into nearby waterways, it also puts the nutrients where they need to be, right next to the roots, said Nic Anderson, livestock business developer for the Illinois Livestock Development Group.

In the U.S. Clean Water Act this is called a "best management practice," and it will be helpful in protecting ground water in the area, said Stacy James, a water resource scientist with the Champaign-based Prairie Rivers Network who has been assisting SOS members with their fight against Sandy Creek Lane LLC. Incorporation is a practice that should be required by law, she said. Managed properly, confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs) don't necessarily pollute water, she said.

"From a water-quality perspective, I think there are ways to manage a facility like this responsibly, but I think the laws should be re-written to require more responsible behavior," she said.

Anderson doesn't want to see injection become mandatory, however. There are circumstances when manure cannot be cut into the soil — when a crop is growing, for instance — and the extra step of incorporating is also more expensive. The added financial burden on farmers could be difficult for smaller operations to absorb, he said.



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Trees grow from the banks of the Big Sandy Creek in Marshall County, pictured in the foreground. In the background, about 1/3 mile away on property owned by long-time area farmer Mike Salz, the Iowa-based Sandy Creek Lane LLC plans to build a 20,000 head hog farm. Area residents are concerned that the facility's manure will taint the creek when it's applied to the surrounding farmland.

"That's where it really kills the small guys," he said.

Meeting requirements

The disposal of waste from CAFOs in Illinois is regulated by the Livestock Management Facilities Act. Large CAFOs such as Sandy Creek Lane LLC are required to submit their waste management plan to the Illinois Department of Agriculture for approval. There are requirements for manure application depending on the nitrogen content of the manure and nitrogen needs of the crop being fertilized, a process farmers monitor themselves. They formulate a plan that can be reviewed by inspectors from the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, which enforces the Clean Water Act.

Environmental groups have been critical of the way the IEPA has enforced the Clean Water Act for CAFOs and lodged official complaints with the USEPA in 2008 and 2009. After investigating the complaints, in 2010 the USEPA responded by chastising IEPA and requiring specific improvements in their enforcement program. IEPA is in the process of revising the program for the better, said Sanjay Sofat, division manager for the IEPA Bureau of Water Pollution Control.

"I think we have made quite a bit of improvement on every bit of the program," he said. "We are going to work with the industry, environmental groups, and the public to make sure everybody is happy."

One improvement has been the hiring of more CAFO inspectors — after hiring three, there are now seven in Illinois, a number James believes is still not sufficient.

"There are thousands of livestock facilities in Illinois," she said. "The Illinois EPA is very much a complaint-driven inspection program. Unless someone complains, once (a CAFO) is built, they might never see an inspection."

Preventing accidents

Better oversight might put a stop to accidents that lead to major pollution events, said James, who would also like to see more regulations on how equipment is inspected and operated.

"There was an incident near Roanoke a few years ago where a hog farmer was land-applying his waste, and there was a problem with the equipment," James said. "It gushed out and ran into a ditch and ended up in a waterway."

The August 2013 spill killed 30,000 fish and aquatic insects living in a 4.5-mile stretch of Panther Creek, according to estimates by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

High levels of ammonia in manure kills fish. It can also kill by putting too much food into the water, James said.

"When the bacteria consume this food, they pull the oxygen out of the water," she said. "The oxygen can be depleted, causing the fish to suffocate."

Streams can heal after a fish kill. How long that takes varies, James said.

"It's something we don't completely understand," she said. "It can be a quick recovery — potentially within a year — or it could take much longer."

Accidents can happen, said Anderson, but swine producers in Illinois are provided with protocols to help them properly manage spills and prepare their facilities for unexpected weather events to reduce accidents.

"You can't avoid a hurricane, but you should at least get to the point where 6 inches of rain doesn't hurt you," he said. "Farmers know it's in their best interest to do that. We help farmers implement systems of checks and balances and encourage them to do inspections on a routine basis so that when Mother Nature comes, you are prepared."

Concerned about wells

The creek is not the only water James and SOS members are worried about. They fear the rules governing construction and monitoring of large CAFO waste pits are not stringent enough, and the groundwater supplying their wells might be threatened, James said.

"They (Sandy Creek Lane LLC) are building their pit below the water table, so the water table will be pushing against the pit — the concern is that they will not be able to detect if it's leaking," said James.

Because rural residents around the facility are responsible for their own wells, they will shoulder the added expense of frequent testing, said James. It's a situation that makes neighbors of big facilities such as Sandy Creek Lane LLC uneasy, said James. Because CAFOs keep getting bigger, there's concern that the old standards are not sufficient.

"We just don't have a good idea if the standards for these facilities are effective, or whether or not the laws are doing a good job," she said.

Anderson, however, says the design regulations are sound.

"The Illinois Department of Agriculture requires the facility to be designed by a licensed practicing engineer in Illinois to meet those structural design specifications," he said. The engineers working for Sandy Creek Lane LLC are aware of the high water table and have added a perimeter drain tile to address the issue, he said.

"There will be a sampling port, so you can see if anything is coming out of the pit," Anderson said. "There's the same concern about water coming into the pit, which would lower the nutrient content of the manure."

Anderson expressed frustration that members of SOS continued to voice concerns over the proposed facility. He said while there have occasionally been instances where a bad operator caused problems, most facilities are good neighbors. The industry is continuing to improve production methods and minimize pollution.

"We are going to continue to do better at what we do and take steps that are reasonable — it does our industry no good to have a bad actor," he said. "We are not out to destroy and damage our environment. That's not our goal."

Anderson, like many in the industry, blames the shrinking number of farmers for the rise in complaints about factory farms. Fifty years ago most everyone

living in the country was involved in agriculture.

Worried about the smell

SOS does have several farmers in its ranks, however. The group also has a number of businessmen who know the importance of making a profit. One of them is also well-acquainted with the role of industry in preventing water pollution.

Steve Goulding owns Oak State Products Inc., a cookie factory in Wenona and one of the area's largest employers. In 2011, to address concerns from the EPA, Oak State built a \$1.2-million wastewater treatment facility at its factory to catch pollutants threatening to overwhelm Wenona's wastewater treatment plant.

After joining SOS early last year, Goulding started thinking about the disparate ways different industries are regulated. His cookie factory had to stop releasing yeast, sugar and shortening into the city's wastewater treatment plant, but Sandy Creek Lane LLC will be allowed to spread millions of gallons of manure on the ground.

"I think they certainly have looser rules than we do," he said. Of course they're completely different industries, and food production is tightly regulated. Goulding said his customers, some of the biggest food companies in the country, are so particular that by the time they finish their inspections he doesn't worry about government inspections.

As a businessman, Goulding wouldn't second-guess how the hog industry is regulated if it weren't going to affect him where he lives — he's very worried about the smell.

"What really concerns me is that they are going to be putting 10 million gallons of pig effluent into the ground," he said. "I used to have customers and suppliers come to my house to do dove hunts and dinners, and I'm not gonna be doing that anymore, because you never know which way the wind is going to be blowing."

Goulding's home is about 1/2 mile south of the proposed CAFO. Built in 1991, the house sits on nearly 40 acres that include a section bordering the Big Sandy Creek. Goulding's made no firm plans yet, but says he will likely sell to the highest bidder and leave the area.

PART ONE OF THREE PARTS: [Hog farm plans become a divisive issue in Marshall County.](#)

PART THREE OF THREE PARTS: [Odors from hog plants prompt health research, questions about regulation.](#)

Read The Northern Circuit Blog: [A History of the Marshall County Hog Fight.](#)

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