

# Comments on EPA/USDA

## Draft AFO Strategy

by Linda D. Appelgate, Executive Director, Iowa Environmental Council

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Denise C. Coleman, Program Analyst

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

ATTN: AFO

P.O. Box 2890

Washington, D.C. 20013-2890

Dear Ms. Coleman:

The Iowa Environmental Council would like to offer the following comments on the Environmental Protection Agency's "Draft Strategy for Addressing Environmental and Public Health Impacts from Animal Feeding Operations." The Council is a statewide alliance of 57 organizations and many individual members working to protect our natural environment and assure a sustainable future.

In the past four years, there have been 51 manure spills into Iowa rivers and streams serious enough for financial penalties. Over 1.1 million fish have been killed along with countless other aquatic species. At least one manure spill contaminated groundwater by flowing into an agricultural drainage well.

Our state by its own admission says it does not have the resources to monitor the gradual degradation of our water. Nor do we have a comprehensive surface and groundwater monitoring program in this state. In addition, air pollution (odors, gases, and airborne particles) threatens the health and well-being of rural neighbors near large-scale operations.

In Iowa, this issue has become so divisive that it threatens not only our health, environment, and quality of life -- but also the well-being and reputation of our conservation farmers -- and the future of our entire state. Iowa farmers have been raising crops and livestock in harmony with the environment for many decades. Thousands are doing so right now. Yet, we are losing farmers in this dramatic shift toward industrial production of livestock.

Our laws (at both the state and national level) support this shift, partly because they allow vast quantities of manure to be disposed of as waste -- rather than valued and used as part of sustainable systems. These laws must change. We must support conservation farming methods and assure that polluters are held fully responsible for contamination they create whether of our air, or water, or soil.

The draft strategy recognizes that state programs have not adequately addressed pollution control from industrial-sized livestock production, and that we need a national strategy, but it is just a beginning. We urge you to strengthen the draft strategy with air quality and water monitoring and strong regulatory backstops. And to truly support -- with financial resources (not just talk) -- education, technical assistance, and incentives for farmers to use manure as part of sustainable systems.

NRCS has an excellent record of farmer assistance -- and farmers want to adapt. But, this strategy will work only with a strong commitment to getting assistance directly to farmers. One-to-one farmer assistance is what works, but only with a much greater commitment on the part of our government.

Negative environmental impacts are inevitable when manure is disposed of as a waste, yet our laws still allow disposal to our air and soil. If manure is used as a resource, there will be fewer negative environmental impacts. In fact, there can be positive impacts in soil fertility and less reliance on commercial fertilizer. Education, technical assistance, and incentives are the most long-lasting and cost-effective ways to enhance conservation farming.

As you know, when manure is treated as a waste society pays the external costs - in atmospheric nitrogen, global warming, ground and surface water pollution, and air quality. We must assure strong penalties for pollution and begin the immediate phase-out of practices that treat manure as a waste, including anaerobic lagoons and spray irrigation.

In addition we recommend:

- \* Development of "watershed specific permits." This will better address site-specific conditions and protect vulnerable areas. Individual operations will still need to have individual permits, with on-site inspection prior to permit issuance.

- \* All CAFOs obtain NPDES permits, even if the facility claims a "no discharge" designation.

- \* Manure management requirements in each permit. Soil and manure testing must be included, with appropriate agronomic rates for manure application to include phosphorus and potassium, not just nitrogen (as we do in Iowa.).

- \* Inclusion of all environmental impacts -- such as air quality -- when setting effluent guidelines.

- \* Surface water and groundwater monitoring must be included as an essential component of permit requirements.

- \* Integrator liability for pollution. If a facility is under contract with an integrator, the integrator should be liable, along with the operator, for permit violations.

- \* A shortened timetable for issuing NPDES permits and making regulatory changes. We must act now before we lose more conservation farmers.

In conclusion, the Iowa Environmental Council believes the joint strategy is a decent, but modest first step. The strategy needs to be significantly strengthened and adequately funded to make any actual difference in protecting our health and the environment. The Council appreciates the opportunity to provide our comments. If you have any questions or if I can be helpful in any way, please do not hesitate to call.

Sincerely,

Linda D. Appelgate  
Executive Director  
Iowa Environmental Council