

Preventing Pollution From Livestock Manure

Sound protections and new partnerships are needed

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There are many ways to raise hogs profitably and protect the environment. Thousands of Iowa farmers are doing both right now. And, clearly, livestock production is an important element in our state's economy and in sustainable farming systems.

Yet, in the past four years, there have been 51 manure spills into Iowa streams, rivers, and lakes serious enough for financial penalties; other spills are still being evaluated. More than 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.

In addition, air quality concerns include odors, gases, and airborne particles. Hydrogen sulfide and ammonia gases are of particular concern to both confinement workers and neighbors.

Nitrogen going to the atmosphere, especially from anaerobic lagoons and aerial spraying, has serious ecosystem impacts.

This issue has become so divisive that it threatens not only our environment and the well-being and reputation of the livestock industry, but also the future well-being of our entire state. The Council is in a unique position to help create solutions - and a vision for Iowa's future.

We have worked with experts and Council members, especially those who are livestock farmers, to develop recommendations to prevent pollution of Iowa's water, air, and soil from the impacts of livestock production. Over the past months, the Council has increasingly added our voice to this debate. We have spoken widely through newspapers and radio, presented a policy paper at the National Environmental Dialogue on Pork Production, worked on proposed federal legislation, and offered recommendations and opened dialogue with the Iowa Farm Bureau Resolutions Committee and other groups.

We have developed a four-part strategy that addresses this issue with both practical understanding and a vision of stewardship. The strategy includes: policy development, research, partnership-building, and communication.

Policy development

Sound policy development is at the core of the Council's mission. This includes not only assuring good environmental laws but also sound administrative rules for carrying out our laws, and effective implementation. Each of these steps can be intricate and time-consuming, yet all are equally important.

Last fall, we began meeting with legislators, farm groups, citizens, and environmental groups about specific ways to strengthen protections in our livestock confinement laws. Our recommendations build on a central theme: We must move toward utilizing manure as a resource and away from systems that treat manure as waste. The recommendations include:

- Significantly increase education, demonstration, and technical assistance to farmers to assist them in using manure as a resource.
- Require operator training, testing, and certification for those who apply manure.

- Increase setbacks for protection of water bodies.
- Increase the ability to make case-by-case permitting decisions that recognize the vulnerability and value of important local resources.
- Increase Department of Natural Resources staff and training to support bi-annual site inspections.
- Require soil conservation plans on all land where manure is applied.
- Require soil and manure testing as part of every manure management plan.
- Include groundwater monitoring wells and reporting as part of all permits.
- Include phosphorus and potassium needs of the soil, not just nitrogen, in determining application rates to prevent pollution from over-application.
- Phase out practices that treat manure as a waste, including anaerobic lagoons and spray irrigation.
- Broaden the Animal Agriculture Consulting Organization (AACO), designated by law to advise the legislature on confinement issues. Include the Council, family farm groups, and other responsible partners currently excluded from formal participation.

Research

Each of our recommendations has a sound research base, and we will continue to build and share that knowledge. Excellent research and information is vital to policy-makers, producers, and the public. Where knowledge gaps exist - and they are considerable for both environmental and human health impacts - increased funding for new research and analysis of existing research are essential.

Our research includes gathering and analyzing available worldwide research on livestock production and potential impacts on air, water, and soil quality. We will continue to work closely with university and government researchers, participating in research dialogues and education opportunities.

Partnership-building

Partnership-building, we believe, is the most effective, durable way to assure sound public policies related to livestock and the environment. We have built on this principle and now are working more closely with potential partners. While we may sometimes see issues with different perspectives, these relationships can give us greater depth of understanding needed for lasting solutions.

Also, through our livestock initiative funded by the Kind World Foundation, we are working with the Iowa Farmers Union and the Center for Rural Affairs in Walthill, Nebraska, to improve environmental protections while supporting a sustainable industry.

Public Awareness

Iowans insist on their "right to know" about threats to their water, health, and natural environment. We must ensure that citizens have access to accurate, science-based information about environmental impacts related to the livestock industry.

Through opinion articles, newspaper, radio and TV, public speaking, and the Council's website, we will continue to speak widely. Public awareness and knowledge create the climate necessary for improvements in public policy. We must ensure that citizens are well-informed and fully included in this statewide debate.

The Council also has a unique opportunity to work with farmers and agricultural interests seeking solutions. Farmers and urban environmentalists are natural allies. Most of us have the

common goal of achieving a sustainable future both environmentally and economically. We truly believe this issue is solvable and that citizens have been polarized unnecessarily. We must treat our soil, water, air, and ecosystems as the precious, finite resources they are. And if we treat manure as a valuable resource - in our research, policies, and actions - then producers and communities, both human and natural, can peacefully co-exist. We will do our best to reach that day.

For a copy of the Council's "Dialogue" comments, legislative proposals, Journal, or newspaper articles on livestock issues, please call or e-mail us at iecmal@earthweshare.org.

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