



Environmental Impacts of Factory Farm Manure: An HSUS Fact Sheet

Each year in the United States, 10 billion land animals are raised and killed for meat, eggs, and milk. In factory farms, these sentient animals are intensively confined by the tens if not hundreds of thousands. Confined farm animals produce almost 500 million tons of manure annually, three times more raw waste than generated by Americans.



Courtesy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture

Life in a Factory Farm

The overwhelming majority of the 10 billion animals raised for meat, eggs, and milk in the United States are confined inside barren warehouses, overcrowded cages, or restrictive pens or stalls on industrialized factory farms. Not only do intensive animal agribusiness practices cause untold animal suffering, they also create a tremendous amount of pollution, producing devastating consequences for the environment and public health in surrounding communities.

A single pig can produce two to four times more waste than a human, and a cow 23 times more. Because tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of animals are intensively confined at a single facility, factory farms generate massive amounts of manure—too much waste for the land to absorb or neighbors to endure.

Despite this, the agribusiness lobby is pushing Congress to pass H.R. 1398 and S. 807, which would exempt these industrialized facilities—some of which generate as much waste as a small city—from the same pollution-reporting and clean-up requirements applicable to other industrial sectors.

Industrial-Scale Pollution from Industrial-Scale Farms

Factory farm waste is a major pollution issue. Unlike the small, independent or family-owned farms that they are driving out of business, industrial-sized factory farms produce industrial-scale, toxic pollution that can—and does—contaminate nearby streams, lakes, and local water bodies, threatening drinking water supplies with pathogens, chemicals, and antibiotics added to feed.

Yet factory farms don't only pollute water. Manure waste can emit hundreds of gases, including hydrogen sulfide, which can cause eye, nose, and throat irritation, and ammonia, an irritant that, at high levels, can cause death. In fact, agricultural operations are the single largest source of toxic ammonia air pollution in the United States. The air around factory farms also becomes contaminated with suspended dust particles, which have been linked to asthma, bronchitis, and other serious health concerns.

The wealth of information linking factory farming with illness in nearby communities led the largest association of public health professionals to evaluate the issue. In 2003, the American Public

Health Association passed a resolution to urge federal, state, and local governments and public health agencies to impose a moratorium on the construction of new factory farms “until additional scientific data on the attendant risks to public health have been collected and uncertainties resolved.”

Contributing to Climate Change

According to a 2006 report by the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the animal agriculture sector is responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions, as measured in carbon dioxide equivalent, than the share contributed by cars, trucks, sport utility vehicles, and other modes of transportation. This figure accounts for animal agriculture’s direct impacts as well as the resources required for feedcrop agriculture.

Globally, the United States is responsible for the greatest emissions of methane from farm animal manure, nearly 1.9 million tons. The majority of these emissions emanate from pig and dairy cow manure, from which methane emissions increased by 37% and 50%, respectively, between 1990 and 2005. The Environmental Protection Agency attributes this increase to the shift towards housing pigs and cows in larger facilities where liquid manure management systems—such as manure “lagoons”—are increasingly used. During the same 15-year period, domestic emissions of nitrous oxide rose by 10%, an increase partly attributed to the poultry industry’s shift toward litter-based manure management systems, confinement in high-rise houses, and an overall increase in the poultry population.

Getting Away with It

Despite the massive amount of pollution caused by factory farms, the agribusiness lobby is urging

Congress to exempt these facilities from environmental and right-to-know laws. Currently, two federal laws, CERCLA (the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act) and EPCRA (the Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act) require that facilities that produce above a certain amount of pollution—based on human health effects—must report the amount of their emissions to the EPA and local emergency responders. Reports from several factory farms show pollution levels far beyond the triggering amounts, sometimes exceeding such triggers by 40 times.



Courtesy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture

These pollution reports not only inform local residents about the quality of their environment; they provide local emergency personnel with information necessary to respond to spills, accidents, and health problems from day-to-day exposure.

Current reporting requirements are minimal. Facilities that regularly

pollute over the reporting trigger can avoid routine reporting simply by submitting an annual report of all emissions. Further, CERCLA already exempts the “normal application of fertilizer,” so farms that responsibly manage and dispose of manure are not subjected to its requirements.

Nevertheless, the agribusiness lobby has pressed for a bill—H.R. 1398 in the House and S. 807 in the Senate—that would exempt factory farm pollution from CERCLA and EPCRA requirements. This legislation would treat factory farms differently than other industrial sectors, despite pollution from factory farm manure matching and even exceeding the amount of pollution from other industries.

Factory farms should be required to follow environmental laws, just like all other major polluting industries. People have a right to know about these facilities, which are putting public health and communities at risk, devastating the environment, and causing terrible animal suffering.

Please support animals, the environment, and rural communities by taking a stand and opposing legislation exempting factory farms from basic environmental requirements.

For more information, contact The HSUS at 202-955-3668 or legislation@hsus.org.
