



As someone who has seen animals care for one another and frolic in play, Harrison understands their capacity for suffering. He remembers, too, the bonds between lambs and their mothers. “The ewes always knew when it was time to eat, and they would corral their babies,” he says. “I loved being a shepherd because it was something I could really take care of.”

Disgusted by factory farms’ elevation of profit and production over compassion and community, Harrison and other Wood County farmers and residents have fought against mega dairies for more than a decade. Despite their best efforts, as many as six factory farms may soon be operating in the county. Seeking a larger voice, the grassroots group joined the Ohio Environmental Stewardship Alliance, a coalition of small farmers, environmentalists, conservationists, and average citizens. Harrison and other coalition members have now turned their sights to supporting an HSUS-backed campaign that could stop

or at least slow the spread of the big agribusiness model in Ohio: a November ballot initiative targeting some of the worst animal abuses.

The initiative would phase out extreme forms of confinement on factory farms: small cages for veal calves, egg-laying hens, and breeding pigs. It would prohibit the transport of downer cows, who are too sick or hurt to stand on their own, effectively preventing them from being slaughtered for food. And it would set humane standards of euthanasia for pigs and cattle; while current law addresses methods of slaughter for some animals destined for human consumption, no such laws exist in Ohio for the killing of sick and injured farm animals. In a 2006 undercover investigation conducted by the Humane Farming Association, workers in one of the state’s factory farms were videotaped hanging sick pigs,

A Line in the Sand

Ohio family farmers join the fight to release their state from factory farming’s chokehold

Just three miles from Tom Harrison’s Northwest Ohio home stands a warehouse-like facility that may one day house thousands of dairy cows.

Long familiar with the plight of people who live next to industrial farming operations, Harrison cringes to think of the putrid smell, fly swarms, toxic emissions, and water pollution likely headed his way—and the plummeting quality of life soon to follow. His heart sinks at the thought of the way animals spend their days inside such overcrowded facilities, treated more like production units on the milking line than sentient beings.

These factory-style operations stand in stark contrast to the type of farming Harrison practiced for much of his life. “I remember going out in the barn when it was winter and taking care of them,” he says of the flock of sheep he kept for about 30 years. “You just can’t buy [these animals] and forget about them. You’ve got to nurture them and make sure they’re growing up and doing OK.”

Factory Farming in Ohio

Egg-laying hens: With 27 million egg-laying hens and about 7 billion eggs produced annually, Ohio is the nation’s No. 2 egg-producing state.

Veal calves: The number of veal calves is unknown, but Ohio ranks in the top six veal-producing states.

Breeding pigs: Ohio has about 170,000 breeding pigs and is ranked eighth nationally in pork production.

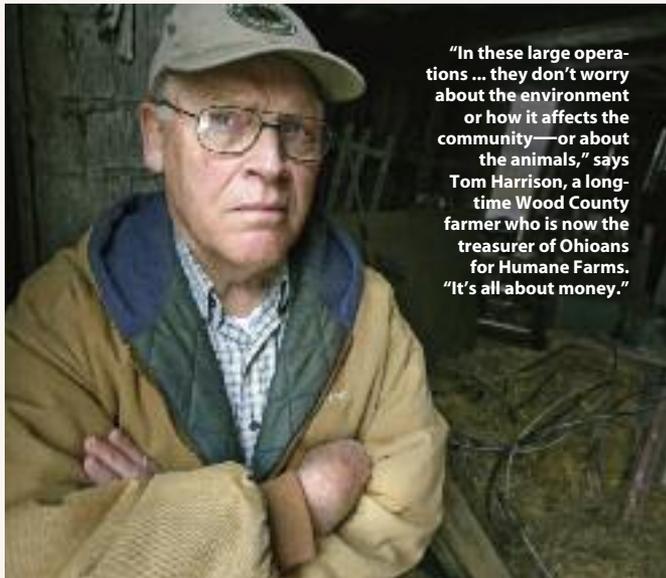


slamming them against concrete, and beating them to death with a hammer.

Coming two years after the overwhelming passage of a landmark ballot initiative outlawing similar extreme confinement systems in California, the Ohio measure would bring reasonable reforms to one of the nation's top farming states. The state's Department of Agriculture lists about 160 facilities as large-scale factory farms, but as many as 4,000 more unpermitted operations may barely miss the threshold for this classification, says Joe Logan, director of agricultural programs at the Ohio Environmental Council.

The economies of scale achieved by these agribusiness behemoths might seem attractive to consumers, says Logan, but the real costs are obscured from public view in the form of government subsidies and other burdens. "What the consumer may save in nominal food prices is typically paid back in additional taxes to stabilize those very large industries," he says, "and also in health impacts and a whole array of things that don't get calculated directly into the food cost, such as the enormous footprint they've made on the environmental quality in Ohio."

If passed, the proposed law is likely to help soften this blow, Logan says; intensive confinement of fewer animals would inevitably lead to reduced applications of manure on fields and lower pollution levels.



Concern for the environment has long been at the forefront of the battle in Wood County, given the region's location in a floodplain and its consequent vulnerability to water pollution from animal waste. Harrison first took up the fight 15 years ago, when a New York mega-dairy farmer came prospecting in Wood County. He and other community members had heard enough of the stories—about how nearby waterways often turn brown with fecal sludge and the stench of gigantic manure cesspools drives neighbors indoors—to want to see for themselves.

A team of Wood County residents headed to New York for a firsthand look at their potential neighbor's home-base operation. "What they saw was something they didn't want in their community," says



Harrison. "Not when you can see manure coming down the road, leaking from the lagoon or from the dairy farm."

Although the activists eventually fended off the New Yorker, two mega dairies later opened. Another has since been built but hasn't begun operations. A fourth is in the planning stages, and a fifth has been proposed. Wood County is also home to an egg factory that confines hundreds of thousands of hens.

For residents fighting to take back their community, the stakes in the upcoming ballot initiative campaign are high. And the nation's big agribusiness groups will likely be looking to Ohio as a battleground to defend their interests; they already spent millions last fall trying to prevent real reform, securing passage of a measure that created a livestock standards board controlled by special interests with a stake in maintaining the status quo.

But Harrison, who is serving as treasurer of the Ohioans for Humane Farms campaign, thinks The HSUS and its supporters can gather the 403,000 valid signatures needed to secure the issue's placement on the Nov. 2 ballot. A survey of likely voters in Ohio shows strong support for an initiative to ensure animals on factory farms can stand up, lie down, turn around, and extend their limbs. Recent history also demonstrates a promising trend. Since the beginning of the decade, The HSUS has led the charge to pass a number of farm animal protection laws; of the nine enacted in seven states, three were the result of citizen ballot initiatives.

If Harrison and other compassionate Ohioans have anything to say about it, by the end of the year the Buckeye State will join that list. Wood County resident Vickie Askins, whose father and grandfather farmed in Ohio, laments the seemingly unstoppable alignment of forces enabling factory farms to set up shop in her community. Large crop farmers in the area even agreed to raise grain for the dairies in exchange for manure to spread on their fields—a devil's bargain for many longtime neighbors. Sometimes when Askins visits friends who live near a dairy farm, she can hardly breathe. "It's not just manure. I grew up around that smell with the dairy cows we had. But it's more like a toxic smell. ... Imagine what it's like for the animals inside," she says. Askins hopes the ballot initiative will help fuel momentum against the mega dairies as well. "We are just so happy to get some help up here."

—Ruthanne Johnson