

The supersizing of America's livestock farms

For cheaper grocery prices, are we risking our health, the environment and squeezing out small farmers?

By Mike Wagner and Ben Sutherly
Dayton Daily News

SOUTH CHARLESTON | For three years, Ohio regulators didn't know what was going on inside the long white barns of the state's largest cattle farm.

They didn't know the farm was storing uncovered piles of manure, stacked higher than a basketball hoop, on a cement slab outside.

Or that rain was washing some of that waste into the nearby Little Miami, a national scenic river. They didn't know about Ohio Feedlot Inc. even though its 9,000 cattle generated about 131,000 tons of manure a year, almost double the amount produced by Dayton's 166,000 residents. They didn't know because the owner didn't tell them.

Regulators didn't discover the long-closed Clark County feedlot had reopened until a prospective buyer contacted the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency to see whether the 185-acre farm met state regulations.

"We couldn't keep up with the large farms," said Jim Simpson, an Ohio EPA supervisor in the agency's Dayton office. "They just kept coming and snowballed us, and that's what happened with that feedlot."

Livestock farms across America have gone the way of Wal-Mart and the retail industry, building superfarms at the pace Wal-Mart and its discount cousins build superstores. But the supersizing of livestock farming, while revolutionizing food production in America, has overrun regulators, caused untold harm to the environment and public health, created an uproar over the treatment of animals and squeezed many small farmers out of business.

Even the very definition of livestock farming has been shaken.

Chicken houses the size of two-car garages have given way to metal buildings longer than a football field with tens of thousands of chickens inside. Hogs are kept in metal-gated pens on concrete slats, a thousand animals under one roof.

Fifty years ago, the average egg farm in Ohio had fewer than 100 birds; now it has close to 10,000. A single operator, Buckeye Egg Farm, has 14 million chickens spread over four counties. Giant companies like Tyson Foods and Perdue Farms are contracting with farmers to expand operations and eliminate overhead. For farmers, the choice has become painfully simple: Get bigger or get out.

Large livestock farms are one reason Americans can buy a dozen eggs for 99 cents, a gallon of milk for \$2, a pound of bacon for \$3 and a ribeye steak for under \$5.

But they are also the reason school bus driver Bernadine Edwards has to close her farmhouse windows even in the dead heat of the Kentucky summer. She is surrounded by 82 chicken houses packed with 2 million birds.

They are the reason Ron Osterholm, a health official in Cerro Gordo County, Iowa, successfully pushed for a yearlong ban on livestock expansion in his county. Before another farm comes in, Osterholm wants to test the air near the largest farms to determine their risk to public health. And they are the reason the Illinois River in Oklahoma is turning bright green.

A nine-month *Dayton Daily News* examination traced many problems on large farms to lax standards, uneven enforcement and rules that vary from state to state.

Even finding the farms that states are supposed to regulate is nearly impossible. Most states require permits for farms that have at least 100,000 chickens, 55,000 turkeys, 2,500 hogs, 1,000 beef cattle or 700 milk cows. But states can't enforce regulations on farms they don't know about, and many states don't know how many megafarms they have.

Some don't even look.

In Virginia, the Department of Environmental Quality waits for farms to apply for a permit. "We don't run up and down the road looking for them," said Scott Haley, an environmental planner for the department. "Occasionally, we find operations through complaints."

Added Rich Powell, a geological scientist for the Surface Water Quality Bureau in New Mexico: "You've probably figured out that most of the people who should be permitted are not permitted." Just 18 of the 46 states with megafarms have conducted a formal inventory or survey to find them, the *Daily News* examination found.

The regulatory climate has helped lure Dutch farmers who have opened dozens of dairies in the Midwest. Ohio officials are concerned: Five Ohio dairies have already been warned about environmental violations.

The *Daily News* traveled to 11 states and the Netherlands, and compiled a comprehensive database of megafarm regulations in every state. The examination found:

- Megafarms are rapidly replacing small and midsized livestock farms. Government statistics show megafarms grew 47 percent from 1982 to 1997, while small and midsized farms declined 25 percent. Put another way, about 2,600 megafarms replaced 339,000 smaller farms. But the number of large farms now is likely much higher. In Ohio, the number of megafarms more than tripled in the last decade, to 139 farms.
- State after state is overhauling megafarm regulations, but operators can still go years without facing inspections, must violate rules repeatedly to risk harsh penalties and are exempt from many environmental standards. Half the states don't require megafarms to meet air-quality standards and just four states enforce limits on toxic gas from large farms.
- Megafarms increasingly operate like factories yet skirt federal standards designed to protect the public and the environment from industrial pollutants. A federal lawsuit in Kentucky seeks to have 80 chicken houses regulated as industrial plants, claiming their ammonia emissions pose a public health threat. Buckeye Egg reported releasing 3.3 million pounds of ammonia in 2000, ranking it among the state's top factories, power plants and other industrial sources.
- Pollution investigations linked to Ohio's livestock farms are on the rise. Livestock farming was suspected in 311 investigations since 1993, up 29 percent from the previous decade. In 2001 and 2002, the state linked 81 incidents to livestock operations — more than from any other source, including oil spills and sewage. An estimated 74,000 fish were killed in those incidents.
- At least 24 people in the Midwest have died from inhaling hydrogen sulfide and methane from manure since the 1970s, including fifth-generation Michigan dairy farmer Carl Theuerkauf and four members of his family, who collapsed one by one in 1989 after breathing methane gas from a manure pit. But the death toll from manure may be much higher. Cryptosporidium, a microorganism found in animal waste, killed 104 people and sickened 403,000 others in Milwaukee in 1993 in an outbreak some blamed on manure from nearby livestock farms. A local health department and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also suspected that manure caused seven miscarriages in a small farming community in Indiana between 1991 and

1993 by contaminating wells. "I thought the water I was drinking was good water," said Melissa Dickerson, who was 22 and pregnant for the first time.

- "Big Chicken" often equals less regulation. Twenty-three states exempt dry-litter poultry operations — the bulk of their chicken farms — from regulations that other megafarms must follow. They include Iowa, the nation's top egg-producing state; North Carolina, the top turkey-producing state; and Georgia and Arkansas, the top two producers of meat chickens. The exemption rankles officials in some neighboring states. Oklahoma and Arkansas are embroiled in a border war about pollution runoff from chicken houses in Arkansas to scenic rivers in Oklahoma. "Yes, we are getting cheap food, but we're being sold a bill of goods," said Don Stull, professor of anthropology at the University of Kansas. "If we look at the real costs — costs to the environment, costs of the loss of the family farm and costs to rural communities — what price are we really paying for that?"

Those who operate and defend the farms say the problems have been blown out of proportion. "A lot of people are trying to take the big farms down with all this factory farm crap," said David Holcomb, a poultry farmer near the Arkansas-Oklahoma border. "We feed the nation. We give it the cheapest and safest food we have ever had. And yet so many people want to destroy us." Farmers also bristle at criticism that animals are mistreated on large livestock farms. "What's good for the health of the chicken is usually good for the farmer's pocketbook," said Marcus Rust, whose family runs Rose Acre Farms of Seymour, Ind., the nation's second largest egg producer.

Most high-rise egg houses pack up to eight chickens to a cage, with each bird allotted a space roughly equal to half a sheet of notebook paper. But Rust said cages are healthier for chickens because farmers can control the birds' diets. "The chicken is a scavenger," he said. "They eat whatever they can find."

Under pressure from animal welfare groups, the United Egg Producers in June introduced new standards for the industry, including one that increases the minimum cage space for chickens up to 40 percent by 2008.

"That brings us more in line with European regulations," said Joy Mench, an animal science professor at the University of California at Davis and a member of UEP's advisory committee. Ohio, like many states, is rewriting rules for its megafarms. But the state also switched regulators, transferring most of the regulatory authority that was under the Ohio EPA for more than 25 years to the Ohio Department of Agriculture.

The Ohio Farm Bureau, the lobbying voice of agriculture and a generous contributor to state candidates, pushed hard for the bill, which passed in 2001.

"It was something that was extremely important to us and perhaps was one of the most important bills that we've worked on," Farm Bureau lobbyist Larry Gearhardt said. "We spent a tremendous amount of time trying to massage the bill and have it drafted the way it should be to run a good program."

The federal government on Dec. 13 is expected to announce stricter rules for governing megafarms. Under drafts of the proposed rules, the U.S. EPA would require that more farms be permitted and that they be inspected more frequently. The rules also would prohibit the spreading of manure and wastewater within 100 feet of surface water, and would require large meat-producing corporations to share environmental responsibility with the farmers they employ. A spokeswoman for the U.S. EPA said the agency would not comment on any findings in the *Dayton Daily News* story, citing the pending announcement of the new rules.

Fred Dailey, director of the Ohio Department of Agriculture, which took over most of the state's authority for regulating megafarms in August, said he's committed to cleaning up problems. The

department's livestock environmental permitting program has 13 employees, including six who do inspections.

"We don't turn a blind eye," Dailey said. "There's no future for the livestock industry in this state unless it's properly regulated."

Jim Buchy, the assistant director for the Ohio Department of Agriculture and a former state legislator, said megafarms are a necessary response to market forces.

"We have this pristine view of mom and dad on a farm with 80 acres and a few milk cows running around, a few chickens running around, a barnyard and a couple of pigs," he said.

"That type of agriculture disappeared over 50 years ago."

Dirty water

Before the hog and chicken farms in northern Darke County got big, Jeff Schlecty would draw his bow and arrow, aim at a carp in the Wabash River and hope he didn't hit a small-mouth bass. "There were so many nice bass, you really had to watch," Schlecty said.

If the 33-year-old Schlecty went fishing in the Wabash now, he likely wouldn't catch a single small-mouth — because there might not be any left.

Two Ohio EPA water-quality studies on the rivers, creeks and streams that feed the Wabash tell why small-mouth bass are vanishing.

"The water in those areas is not in good shape, and the primary cause of the (pollution) is not septic tanks, treatment plants or fertilizer — it's manure, mainly from large farms," said Robert Miltner, an aquatic biologist for the Ohio EPA. "The problems with manure and farms have been building for many years, and this confirmed what we believed all along. We didn't find a single small-mouth bass in the Wabash River."

The Wabash begins near New Weston, an hour's drive north of Dayton, and winds 475 miles through Ohio and Indiana before emptying into the Ohio River near Evansville. The Ohio portion of the river is the state's "most degraded watershed," according to the EPA report.

"It's unlikely the Wabash will ever support healthy aquatic communities," the report states. EPA researchers tested for fish quality, bacteria and other contaminants during 18 months in 1999 and 2000. The studies found the poorest water quality in northern Darke and southern Mercer counties — an area with hundreds of small and medium-sized livestock farms and 71 of the state's 139 megafarms.

Acre for acre, those two counties produce more eggs than anywhere else in the United States. Since the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972, the nation's rivers have been getting cleaner. But that's not true of the Ohio portion of the Wabash.

Ohio regulators say chicken, hog and dairy farms — some of which regulators have directly linked to fish kills and other pollution problems — are the principal reason the Wabash River is so polluted.

In many spots along the Wabash, manure from farmland can wash directly into the river. In Indiana, the Wabash also cuts through farmland but a green buffer — visible from the air — protects the river from the runoff.

"There is nothing there — no buffers on either side," said Rick Wilson, a megafarm inspector for the Ohio EPA, as he looked down from a small plane above the river in Mercer County. "Trees,

grass or some kind of buffer protects the water and aquatic life from (manure), from runoff, but it's just not there."

Tom Menke, a consultant for more than 100 of Ohio's megafarms, didn't dispute the poor water quality in the area, but he said it is due more to septic tanks and sewage from treatment plants. Larger livestock farms produce millions of gallons of manure, which is often impounded in lagoons or pits beneath barns. The manure is then pumped into tanker spreaders or through a dragline pulled by a tractor and injected into the soil. Sometimes the lagoons overflow or leak. Other times, farmers apply too much manure or put it on frozen or saturated soil, and excess nutrients seep into rivers.

Ohio wildlife officials linked the deaths of 333,000 fish during the last decade to livestock. Small and midsized farms cause a majority of the fish kills linked to livestock in Ohio, but several megafarms have repeatedly violated pollution laws. Those farms were also responsible for some of the largest fish kills.

Between 1994 and 1997, Cal-Maine Foods egg farms in Darke County were cited three times for spilling chicken manure and chicken parts into rivers and streams, including a 1994 incident that killed 49,000 fish in the Stillwater River. The Mississippi-based company is the nation's largest egg producer.

"Handling manure was not a high agenda item," said Fred Adams, Cal-Maine's chief executive officer. "But in the last few years, it has become very, very important. We do whatever is necessary to comply with laws. The biggest challenge we had some 10 years ago is recognizing it's a top priority."

Sunnyside Farms near Fort Recovery was cited six times in the last decade for discharging chicken manure and water used to wash eggs. The farm is owned by Midwest Poultry Services of Mentone, Ind., the nation's 10th largest egg producer. Robert Krouse, Midwest Poultry's president, said the company has taken steps to improve how it puts wash water on fields. He also said the company is monitoring those field applications more closely.

Daylay Egg Farm of West Mansfield was ordered to pay \$60,000 in August for repeated mishandling of manure and wash water at four egg megafarms in Union County between October 1995 and July 2000. In July 2000, one of the farms discharged chicken manure into the Scioto River, killing an estimated \$2,400 worth of fish. The state reduced the penalty after Daylay, the nation's 24th largest egg producer, agreed to invest in improvements to prevent future environmental problems. The company declined comment over the telephone.

Buckeye Egg has consistently run afoul of pollution laws, angered neighbors about fly and odor problems and caused harm to the environment.

In 1983, a Buckeye Egg farm in Licking County spilled chicken manure into a creek, killing nearly 150,000 fish; two spills in 1999 killed 17,500 fish. Dailey, the director of the Ohio Department of Agriculture, sent Buckeye Egg a letter in August detailing 87 environmental violations. The farm is still in business, but its owner, Anton Pohlmann, returned to Germany and put the company up for sale.

"It only takes one bad actor in a state, and probably every state has at least one company that's a chronic violator, that has ignored all the best management practices of livestock production," said Paul Lasley, rural sociologist at Iowa State University.

Not all violators are megafarms.

In August, 11,790 fish died after cow manure spilled into a tributary of the Wabash River and eventually reached the river itself in Fort Recovery. The discharge came just three months after a

May 9 investigation at the same dairy revealed an overflowing manure storage pond. Recent rains had kept the farmer, Michael Fullenkamp, from withdrawing liquid manure from the pit and spreading it on fields. Fullenkamp declined comment on the incidents.

EPA records show the Fullenkamp dairy had 350 cows, 400 replacement heifers and housing for about 50 calves — a big farm, but not a megafarm.

"I think the image is that if you weren't a large farm, you wouldn't be a polluter," said Neil Diller, chief financial officer for Cooper Farms, which processes more than 4 million turkeys a year in Ohio. While that perception is inaccurate, Diller said getting bigger raises the environmental stakes.

"The bigger operators have to be better operators because when something goes wrong, it's a lot bigger wrong," he said.

"It's a thin line we walk all the time between being efficient and being responsible."
Farm or factory?

The thundering buzz echoed through the Kentucky cornfields, and grew louder as Leesa Webster walked the long dusty driveway that connects her property to her mother's.

"It sounds like an airport or something over there," Webster said, pointing to the top of a steep hill. Over the hill was a chicken farm. It's the kind of farm where the whirr of industrial-sized fans in warehouselike buildings can be heard a mile away. The kind where hundreds of thousands of chickens are herded onto a conveyer belt and boxed into crates.

The kind where forklifts load the crates onto a converted school bus that drives them to the slaughterhouse.

Chicken operations like this Tyson Chicken farm south of Owensboro, Ky., fuel the debate of farm or factory.

Larger operators often post employee information in English and Spanish and have workers punch time cards and wear hairnets. On cattle and hog farms, engineers design manure pits capable of holding tens of millions of gallons of liquid manure. And on some farms, the owners spend thousands of dollars to cool and heat their buildings.

At the Tyson farm, each broiler chicken house is typically 400 to 500 feet long and contains 20,000 to 25,000 broiler chickens. The houses are dimly lit more than 20 hours a day to help stimulate eating around the clock. Unlike egg farms, where chickens are kept in cages, broilers are scattered about the floor of the house, a huge canvas of white. Each house typically has two six-ton feed bins.

Large poultry companies like Tyson are known as integrators. They own the chickens from the time they hatch until they land in the frozen food section of a grocery store.

The people running the houses are known as growers, but they consider themselves farmers. The view isn't always shared by those who live near the chicken houses.

"There is no farming going on down there," said Webster, holding her nose to block the stench of dead chickens. Today's big farms may resemble factories, but they aren't regulated like them. Only a fraction of today's megafarms operate under a federal permit to minimize water pollution. Those wanting to erect a megafarm don't have to have the land rezoned. And federal standards for workplace safety are enforced only on farms with more than 10 employees. Automation allows many megafarms — even some large ones — to stay below that number.

Kelley Donham, an occupational and environmental health professor at the University of Iowa, said many large farms view regulations as an obstacle to doing business. He said that mentality can make it difficult for public health officials to work with farms in a proactive manner. "They don't want regulations," Donham said. "They say, 'Show me the bodies, show me some kind of disease that this causes. Otherwise, don't talk to me.' "

Yet researchers have documented that working inside large livestock operations can be hazardous. An Iowa report released this year said at least 25 percent of workers in hog megafarms report respiratory health problems. Some workers spend 70 hours a week inside confinement buildings, breathing manure fumes from hundreds and sometimes thousands of livestock.

Worker health risks could be reduced through management practices, engineering controls, use of personal protective equipment and health surveillance, the report said.

"However, such programs are exceedingly rare in today's (megafarm) industry."
A real threat

The doctor slowly moved the ultrasound wand across a pregnant Melissa Dickerson's abdomen. There was no heartbeat.

A routine check-up three months into the 22-year-old Dickerson's pregnancy turned into tragedy. Dickerson, pregnant for the first time, tried to do everything right. She knew she should drink lots of water, so she did. What she didn't know was that the well water was contaminated at the family's farm near LaGrange, Ind., a town with 2,300 people and four working traffic lights.

"I had no idea what was going on," said Dickerson, now a 31-year-old mother of two sons. "I just wanted to know why it happened because I didn't want another miscarriage."

Two neighbors suffered the same loss. The three women, all living within two miles of each other in LaGrange County, had a total of seven miscarriages between 1991 and 1993.

All three women got their water from wells and lived within one mile of a farm with 450 hogs. The LaGrange County Health Department and the CDC concluded the wells were contaminated by manure from the hog farm — a conclusion the hog farmer denies.

Until now, the women have never been interviewed.

"I don't want to reopen a very painful time in my life, but I do think it's important that women are reminded to check the water they are drinking, especially during pregnancy," said one of the women, who didn't want to be identified and had two miscarriages during the two-year period. "There was a lot of pain for everyone during all that."

The miscarriages intensified the national debate about whether manure poses a real health threat to humans.

Manure provides a vital source of nutrients in soil. But manure also can be deadly if contaminants seep into drinking supplies and cause high nitrate levels. Babies one to four months old are particularly susceptible and may develop blue baby syndrome, a blood disorder associated with high nitrate intake.

Pinpointing the source of bad water is difficult. Local health officials didn't suspect the LaGrange County miscarriages were caused by contaminated well water until a local resident tested his well and found dangerous levels of nitrates.

County Health Department Director William Grant interviewed 19 families and concluded three women were drinking bad water. The Double D Hog farm appeared to be the main source of

contamination, but there were other farms in the area and several septic tanks located near the aquifer.

"We were able to conclude that the nitrate levels in that area where the miscarriages were occurring were more than double compared to the households where women were having healthy births," Grant said. "We took a lot of heat from our findings."

No one took more heat than David Beiswanger, former owner of the Double D hog farm, who said Grant and the government were wrong to blame him.

"There were some people in our little town running around telling people I was a baby killer and that my farm was killing unborn children in this area," said Beiswanger, 49, who sold the farm in 1997. "Imagine what that felt like for me."

Grant and the CDC concluded that waste went into the aquifer through a crack in Beiswanger's manure pit. Beiswanger replaced the pit but denies it had a leak. He said digging up the pit was "the biggest mistake I made because it made it look like I needed to replace it when I didn't." Fertilizer, other farms or the sheer age of the wells could have polluted the groundwater, Beiswanger said.

"It's possible that there was some problem with my farm, but I'm supposed to be innocent until proven guilty and none of them — Grant or the CDC — had any proof that I was guilty of anything," he said.

An expert who assisted Grant during the investigation believes there was a direct link between the miscarriages and manure.

Dr. Solomon Isiorho, a professor of Geo Sciences at Indiana-Purdue University, was already conducting an extensive water-quality study of more than 600 wells in LaGrange County when he learned of Grant's investigation.

Isiorho tested the wells in the area of Beiswanger's hog farm.

"Based on what I had in front of me, there was no other reason as to why these women were having miscarriages," he said. "The chemistry of the water suggested that there was nothing else in the water besides nitrate."

No one was watching

Dave Long was proud that hardly anyone knew he had reopened Ohio Feedlot Inc. He used wood chips instead of sawdust for bedding in the cattle stalls, and the system did such a good job of controlling odor and flies he won an entrepreneurial business award from Wittenberg University in 2001.

"No one even knew we were out here," he said. "We ran a clean operation." Ohio Feedlot may have been the state's first megafarm when it took in 20,000 beef cattle in 1968. But business dropped off and the feedlot shut down for seven years in the 1990s. State officials didn't know Long had reopened the farm until a prospective buyer, Smithfield Foods Inc., contacted them to see if the farm was in compliance with the state's environmental regulations. Long said he didn't think he needed a permit because his cattle were under roof. He also said the manure that washed into the Little Miami River was from Garick PayGro, the composting company next door. He said he allowed PayGro to store manure on the slab.

"I knew it was going in (the river)," he said, "but that was PayGro's manure — not mine." But officials for PayGro, which is headquartered near Cleveland, said the company never stored manure on Long's property.

"The manure was not ours. Dave Long stored manure on the concrete slabs because he had nothing to do with it," said Gary Trinetti, president of the Garrick Corp. "We would never tell somebody to put all this manure on their property if it were our manure."

Trinetti said the only time PayGro purchased manure from the feedlot was during a five-month period in 2000. Carl Kipp Jr., technical director at PayGro and one of the co-founders of Ohio Feedlot, said the concrete slab was built in the mid-1980s. He said manure piles stored on the slab were typically about 50 feet wide and 10 to 15 feet high.

He said Long stored manure on the slab for three years.

"I would see it out there every day," Kipp said. PayGro, which was fined \$4,000 in 1992 after a manure spill into the Little Miami killed 5,467 fish, recently applied for a federal pollution permit that will allow the Ohio EPA to more closely monitor the composting facility.

Cathy Alexander, a supervisor in Ohio EPA's Division of Surface Water, said state officials don't know how much manure seeped into the Little Miami during the three years Long owned the feedlot. But a water test in August 2001 found ammonia levels downstream of the farm were four times greater than upstream.

"It really doesn't matter to us whose manure it was," Alexander said.

Smithfield finalized the Ohio Feedlot purchase in October. This time, the EPA demanded that the owners obtain a federal permit to operate as a megafarm.

The troubles at the feedlot show how difficult it is for states to track farms that expand and change constantly.

Ohio EPA Executive Director Christopher Jones admits that his agency did not make regulating megafarms a priority for two decades. "When you had to deal with issues like large farms, you would go after them when there were complaints," he said.

But Jones said during the past four years the EPA became more aggressive by inspecting farms and tracking their compliance with state environmental regulations.

Farmers like Bill Siefring, who owns an egg farm near Rossburg, say tougher regulations penalize all megafarmers for the abuses of a few.

"I think there needs to be things in place, but to make them so strict that it makes it where you don't want to be in the business — I don't know if that is the direction to go either," Siefring said. "When we first got in this business in 1986 or 1987, you could still operate and do things without a lot of people looking over your shoulder.

"Now it's like everybody and their brother's looking over my shoulder."

Staff writers Ken McCall, Laura A. Bischoff, Dale Dempsey and Martha Hickman Hild contributed to this report.

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Agriculture's hidden costs come into view

A Dayton Daily News Editorial

Few taxpayers fail to recognize the enormity of government subsidies to agriculture. Maybe none, after President George W. Bush this spring signed into law farm-support legislation that carries a 10-year price tag of nearly \$250 billion.

But for all of the attention federal farm subsidies have received — for their sheer size, for how much goes to corporate as opposed to family farmers — other high-price agribusiness subsidies have all but escaped notice.

These are hidden subsidies granted through government neglect, without public debate. Their costs are insidious and have evaded a precise public accounting. But their growing scope and repercussions are coming into sharp focus.

American agriculture has undergone a quiet but dramatic revolution during the past decade, one that rivals in scale and adapts in technique the industrial revolution that preceded it. And now, as then, dangerous excess has become the price of unprecedented production.

America's livestock farms have mutated into mass-scale animal factories that overburden the land, air and waterways and imperil public health. Their emergence eluded public detection, and, until recently, their growth has been virtually unchecked by regulators.

The factory-farm phenomenon was the subject of a nine-month *Dayton Daily News* investigation, with the results published this week in the series "Down on the factory: Cheap food, hidden costs."

It represents, in many ways, the latest retelling of an old American story: how our society works to restore balance and moderation after periods of marvelous but unrestrained agricultural innovation.

There can be little doubt that, early in the last century, centralized stockyards and mechanized meat-packing represented spectacular progress in how affordable food was delivered to an increasingly urbanized society. But no less spectacular was the risk of human sickness caused by careless and unsanitary production methods.

Similar breakthroughs were brought midcentury by chemical pesticides. They protected America's bounty from blight, and one miracle compound capable of killing hundreds of kinds of insect pests earned its inventor the Nobel Prize in medicine.

But dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane, the insecticide better known as DDT, had hidden hazards. It caused catastrophe to birds, fish and some mammals, leading to contamination of the food chain and risking imbalance to the world ecosystem.

These were agricultural innovations gone technically awry. Each were brought back from the brink.

But not without fierce resistance from monied agricultural interests. And not without brilliant expositions of fact that captured the public's attention — first by Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle*, his polemic novel of Chicago's meat-packing industry, and then by Rachel Carson, the mother of the environmental movement, in *Silent Spring*, her incisive brief exposing DDT's dangers.

Much of the muck that now must be raked to correct excesses brought by factory farms is just that: muck.

The tens of thousands of barnyard animals — chickens, turkeys, pigs, quartered in close concentration and fed and bred with clockwork precision — have indeed led to well-stocked refrigerators and a happy ring at supermarket cash registers.

But they also produce manure in monumental, mind-boggling amounts. Inadequately stored, tended and treated, it poisons our water, sends noxious odors across the land and jeopardizes human health.

Mighty agribusiness, as before, will aggressively oppose reform. But the public, as before, can correct the imbalance. Understanding the true costs is the first step.

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.01.2002]

Processed food becoming the norm, but Americans' need for efficiency may come at expense of some farmers

By Ben Sutherly
Dayton Daily News

Jennie-O Turkey Store, the nation's largest turkey processor, sums up why so many Americans are choosing prepackaged meals over home cooking.

The company's Web site, jennieo.com, this summer showed a thin, attractive woman grinning broadly over a cup of soup made with processed turkey meat. The message beside the young woman's red hair: "My mother used to spend three hours making turkey for dinner. What was she thinking?"

Today's time-pressed Americans aren't willing to spend hours in the kitchen. Many choose to pay more for convenience food that requires little preparation. Some consumers don't even take time to sit down to a bowl of ready-to-eat cereal, hitting the road instead with a cereal bar whose filling is "made with real milk."

Food companies have responded by using processing to add convenience — and value — to grains, meat and other raw farm products. As a result, a growing share of the American consumer's dollar goes toward food processing instead of food production.

"Farmers would be better off if everybody baked cornbread instead of eating Kellogg's Corn Flakes," said John Connor, a Purdue University agricultural economics professor.

Some farms, hoping to get a share of the profits from processing, transportation and marketing, are expanding into those areas — a business strategy called "vertical integration."

Purdue University agricultural economists estimate 90 percent of the U.S. poultry industry, 25 percent of the hog industry and 7 percent of the beef industry is vertically integrated. Most hogs and cattle are marketed through some form of coordination between producer and packer.

Some small farmers argue that they can't compete against corporations that control virtually all variables of food production.

Paul Lasley, a rural sociologist at Iowa State University, said the practice raises fundamental ethical questions: "Is price the only factor that ought to be considered, and is it a level playing field?"

Some states have tried to preserve competition, but even those efforts are being challenged. The world's largest hog processor and producer, Smithfield Foods, filed a lawsuit in July seeking to overturn Iowa's ban on Smithfield and other packers' ownership of hogs. Iowa is one of nine states in the upper Midwest and Great Plains that have such bans.

In recent years, Iowa has tightened its anti-corporate regulations to keep Smithfield and other processors out of the business of producing hogs to prevent monopolies — moves designed to protect smaller hog producers from unfair competition and consumers from price gouging.

But Smithfield argues in its lawsuit that vertical integration gives the company more quality control over its product and gives consumers what they want: cheap, uniform pork.

"Because of vertical integration, Smithfield can tell its customers important information about its hogs: where they were raised, what they were fed at every stage of their growth cycle, their genetic makeup and whatever medical regimens they have had," the lawsuit states.

"Smithfield's need to achieve and maintain quality control over its products is ultimately consumer dictated."

Although still controversial in the hog industry, vertical integration transformed the poultry industry in the 1960s.

Rose Acre Farms has 16 million laying hens — second-most in the country — but its business goes well beyond production.

At the company's Cort Acres farm in southern Indiana, 2.2 million chickens in 34 hen houses lay about 1.5 million eggs a day. The eggs are processed — cleaned, sorted by size and put in cartons — before leaving the farm in semi-trailers. Each trailer is capable of hauling up to 314,000 eggs to distributors or directly to warehouses of supermarket chains such as Kroger and Aldi.

In 1990, Rose Acre built a breaker plant at Cort Acres and began breaking eggs on-site, shipping up to 48,000 pounds of liquid egg product per semi tanker.

"We can break it and sell it ourselves and get more money out of it," said John Rust, whose family owns and runs Rose Acre Farms. "It basically eliminates the middleman."

Other large egg producers also are vying for a piece of the booming breaker business. Breaker plants processed about 21.7 billion U.S. eggs in 2001, up from 13.8 billion in 1991, according to Joanne Ivy, senior vice president of the American Egg Board.

"It boggles your mind how many eggs are processed in the United States," said Brian Higginbotham, who manages Cort Acres' packaging department. "The sheer scale is just unreal." Cort Acres' newest egg separating machine alone can process more than 1.5 million eggs during a 9 1/2-hour shift.

Cooper Farms, which contracts with more than 150 turkey producers in west-central Ohio and east-central Indiana for its meat, took a big step toward integration in 1987 when it built a processing plant in St. Henry.

Four years later, the company remodeled a plant near Van Wert to produce cooked turkey. The company annually produced more than 400,000 pounds of cooked turkey products at the plant, which was heavily damaged in November by a tornado.

At the St. Henry plant, rubber fingers pluck white feathers from freshly killed 40-pound turkeys, which hang from metal shackles and are processed at a rate of 40 per minute. Some workers vacuum the birds' lungs, kidneys and crops; others trim occasional bruises and scrapes from the meat before the various parts move down separate production lines. Once the birds move through the production process they are known as M.S.T. — mechanically separated turkey. In an adjoining room, known as the fabrication department, masses of turkey meat are tumbled, a ton at a time, in a bin. Tumbling extracts protein from the meat, giving it a different consistency; flavoring is added to the meat as it is tumbled.

After the processed turkey leaves the St. Henry plant, it is sold, packaged and put on grocery shelves.

Neil Diller, the company's chief financial officer, said vertical integration helps midsized processors like Cooper compete with big turkey integrators like Jennie-O.

"If we can add value," he said, "it gives us another opportunity to be more competitive."

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.01.2002]

Farmers blamed for outbreak that killed 104 in Milwaukee Officials say farm waste polluted city's water system in 1993

By Mike Wagner
Dayton Daily News

MILWAUKEE | Roy Cobb tested positive for HIV. Then he was diagnosed with cancer. But it wasn't a disease that nearly put him in his grave.

It was tap water.

Cobb filled his favorite mug, roughly the size of a soup bowl, five or six times a day to replenish his raw body, drained during chemotherapy treatments.

"I couldn't help but think about dying. It was bad," said Cobb, a 42-year-old former security guard whose TV tray is littered with dozens of pill bottles. "If you can't trust the water that comes out of your faucet, what can you trust? I was really angry at the people that let that happen."

Nine years after 104 people died and 403,000 others got sick in one of the largest water contamination episodes in U.S. history, Cobb still doesn't know who to blame.

The source of *Cryptosporidium*, the intestinal parasite that seeped through Milwaukee's water filtration system in the spring of 1993, remains a mystery.

But some experts think they know how the parasite got into the city's water supply.

"It was pretty convincing that cow manure from dairy farms was a source in the Milwaukee outbreak," said Jeffrey Wennberg, who chaired the drinking water committee for the National League of Cities and is one of the nation's leading experts on water issues. "I don't know of anyone who has proposed a reasonable alternative explanation. You couldn't use a tracer test to say it was this farm or that farm. But if you look at all the possible vectors in that Milwaukee watershed, there wasn't anything else present that could have caused that kind of outbreak." Wennberg and others believe heavy rains washed manure from large livestock farms into the Milwaukee River, which flows into Lake Michigan — the water source for the city of Milwaukee and surrounding areas. Contaminated water overwhelmed the city's treatment plant and poisoned the water supply for hundreds of thousands of unsuspecting residents.

Area farmers vehemently dispute any notion that farm livestock could trigger an outbreak of such magnitude.

"We were an easy target," said Jeff Opitz, a dairy farmer whose farm sits near the Milwaukee River. "We were the scapegoats."

The livestock farms came under suspicion for three reasons: Hundreds of farms operate near the rivers and streams that empty into Lake Michigan, *Cryptosporidium* is known to thrive in the intestines of livestock — as well as many other animals — and Wisconsin has a history of manure runoff problems.

Many say they believe that the Milwaukee outbreak illustrates the public health threat large livestock farms pose to neighboring farms, residents in nearby towns and even people living miles

away in urban lofts and big city housing projects. But it also demonstrates how difficult it is to trace the source of contaminated water.

"Manure runoff into the river is certainly a highly plausible cause, if not the cause of the outbreak in Milwaukee," said Robert Adler, director of the Clean Water Program for the Natural Resources Defense Council from 1987 to 1994.

But a July 1994 report in the *New England Journal of Medicine* had a slightly different conclusion, suggesting slaughterhouses and human sewage also could have triggered the outbreak. Investigators from city and state health departments, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other health officials spent months combing through records of dairy farms and slaughterhouses, reviewing water plant documents and analyzing water flows from streams and rivers.

The evidence for any one source: inconclusive.

Milwaukee remains the nation's poster child for what can happen when water goes bad. Large pots of boiling water were a constant on stoves throughout the city. Thick tape covered many of the drinking fountains in crowded emergency rooms and half-empty school buildings. Local stores couldn't keep bottles of Pepto-Bismol on their shelves.

Milwaukee Mayor John O. Norquist issued a boil-water advisory after a state health investigator refused to drink the city's water.

"The investigator was drinking a Diet Coke and I put a glass of city water in front of him and asked him if he was willing to drink it now," Norquist recalled. "He said he didn't want to drink the water so I ordered the advisory before we even had the final test results."

The city quickly switched the compound it was using to settle sediment in the water from Lake Michigan, a move that seemed to work. Two other steps would eventually restore confidence in the water supply: The intake valve drawing water to the treatment plant was moved farther from shore, and a new \$90 million treatment plant was constructed.

The Milwaukee outbreak sent nearly 45,000 people to doctors, about 4,400 to hospitals, accounted for 479,000 lost days at work and cost employers tens of millions of dollars, according to a study conducted by the Milwaukee Department of Health.

No group suffered more than those with HIV.

Cryptosporidiosis normally causes diarrhea and stomach cramps for people in good health, but it can be fatal for those whose immune systems are weakened by disease.

"The minute the outbreak was announced by the city we knew this was going to be a disaster, and it was for so many people," said Doug Nelson, executive director of the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin.

The center received calls from people who couldn't control their diarrhea or stop vomiting. Some were losing weight at an alarming rate.

The outbreak lasted two to three weeks. Of the 104 fatalities, fewer than a dozen were transplant or cancer victims. The rest had HIV or AIDS. Many people still blame the farms that operate along the Milwaukee River, starting about 20 miles north of the city. Opitz, who runs one of those farms, is angry that farmers were singled out without proof.

The Opitz farm sits just outside of Saukville, less than a mile from the Milwaukee River. Now 43, he took over the farm from his father when he was 21, and has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars upgrading his manure lagoons to protect the creeks and streams near his property.

"Most of us try to be as sensitive as possible to the environment. That's why it bothers me that some people think farmers made all of those people sick," he said. "We just didn't have a big city budget to defend ourselves when it happened."

Just down the road from Opitz, third-generation small dairy farmer Ken Albinger tends to his farm chores in muddied jean overalls and a faded baseball hat, his dog fast on his heels.

Albinger, who is president of the Ozaukee County Farm Bureau, said farmers in the area are careful how they handle manure, although he admits it wasn't always that way.

"To be honest, years ago, a lot of farmers would just go down, throw their manure in a big pile not too far from a creek and not worry about it," he said.

Many farmers blame Norquist, who is still mayor, for fueling speculation that farms along the Milwaukee River were responsible for the outbreak. Norquist, who is married to an active environmentalist, said he never blamed anyone but does believe that large concentrated livestock operations are a bad idea.

"They are basically fouling the water systems of downstream users," he said. "If they had treatment facilities to handle all of their waste and didn't do damage to the environment I could see the economic advantages of having them. But (large livestock farms) are working against the small farmer and essentially putting many of them out of business."

Following the health crisis in Milwaukee, the city faced another outbreak — in the legal system. Thousands of people filed lawsuits against the city and others, including 40 wrongful death suits. Although the city's attorneys estimated that Milwaukee could pay hundreds of millions of dollars to victims, in the end the city paid out only \$100,000.

Cobb, who nearly died from drinking contaminated water, received \$250.

Although he survived the outbreak, Cobb now has full-blown AIDS. Every day he swallows about 20 pills — some to help with AIDS, a couple to keep the symptoms of Cryptosporidiosis from returning.

He still drinks lots of water, but never from his faucet.

"I don't know how many years I have left to live," he said, "but I know I ain't drinking any more tap water."

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.01.2002]

Glossary of terms

Dayton Daily News

- **Megafarm:** Used generically, but states all have different terms for large-scale livestock farms. The most commonly used label is CAFO, the acronym for Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation. In Iowa, megafarms are called "confinements." In Pennsylvania, they are called "advanced farms." Megafarms are typically defined as those having 1,000 animal units, or 100,000 chickens, 55,000 turkeys, 2,500 hogs, 1,000 cattle or 700 milk cows.
- **Animal units:** The equivalent of one beef cow is an animal unit. Under this definition, an animal unit would consist of 0.7 milk cows, 2.5 hogs, 55 turkeys and 100 chickens.

- Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs): A farm housing at least 1,000 animal units.
- Lagoon: An excavated, diked or walled structure or combination of structures designed for the treatment or storage of manure. In many states, lagoons must be designed and constructed in compliance with Natural Resources Conservation Service specifications.
- Manure management plan: A plan to manage the amount, form, placement, and application of animal manure to prevent pollution, maintain soil productivity and achieve realistic yield goals. A nutrient management plan includes a whole range of plant nutrient sources such as chemical fertilizers and biosolids (sewage sludge) as well as manure.
- Broiler chickens: Meat chickens that are raised for seven to 10 weeks before they are slaughtered, processed and distributed to supermarkets and restaurants. Unlike laying hens, broiler chickens are not housed in cages but raised on the floor of chicken houses.
- Vertical integration: The control of multiple aspects of food production, including animal production, processing, distribution and marketing.
- Integrator: A company that uses vertical integration as a business strategy.
- Breaker plant: A plant that processes eggs for use in products such as cake mix and salad dressing.
- National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Program (NPDES): A federal program that grants the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and delegated state EPA offices the authority to regulate discharges of pollutants from sources such as factories and municipalities. In 1976, the U.S. EPA issued regulations still in effect today for large farms as part of its implementation of the NPDES program.
- Grower: Typically a farmer who raises meat chickens. Growers often contract with large companies like Tyson Foods, Inc. to run large chicken operations.

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.01.2002]

Project contributors

Dayton Daily News

• Reporters

Ben Sutherly, a staff writer in the *Dayton Daily News*' North Miami Valley Bureau, has written many stories about agriculture since joining the newspaper staff in 1999. He grew up on a Miami County dairy farm and is a graduate of Denison University.

Mike Wagner is an investigative reporter for the *Daily News* and worked on the newspaper's 2001 series *The Foreign Game* that was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize. Mike has been with the *Daily News* since 1996, covering business and Ohio government and politics. Previously he was a reporter for the *Springfield News-Sun*. He is a graduate of Ohio State University.

Laura A. Bischoff works in the newspaper's Columbus bureau. She has worked at the *Daily News* since 1995, and has covered local and state government and business. Previously she worked for the *Flint Journal* in Flint, Mich. She is from suburban Detroit and graduated from the University of Michigan.

Ken McCall, database reporter, has worked for the *Daily News* since 1998. Ken has covered Warren County and Montgomery County government and worked on numerous special projects. Previously he worked for the *Las Vegas Sun*, the *San Luis Obispo Tribune* and *California* magazine. A Dayton native, Ken graduated from Bowling Green State University and has a master's degree from Ohio State University.

Martha Hickman Hild, director of News Research Services, has worked for the *Dayton Daily News* since May 2001. Prior to that, she co-directed a research laboratory at Miami University, worked as a freelance technical writer, and was a technical manager at The Mazer Corporation, an educational publishing services company. A native of Wilmington, Del., she holds a B.A. from Oberlin College, and a Ph.D. from the University of Leeds, U.K.

Dale Dempsey is the *Dayton Daily News*' environmental reporter. He has worked for the *Daily News* since 1984, and the *Journal Herald* before that. Dale celebrated his 25th year with the company in 2002. He is from Dayton and graduated from the University of Dayton.

- Photographer

Jim Witmer, staff photographer, has worked for the *Dayton Daily News* for seven years and won numerous awards, including Ohio Photographer of the Year. Previously he worked at the *Troy Daily News* and *The Miami (Fla.) News*. He lives in Troy, and graduated from Ohio University. He grew up on a dairy farm near Orrville, Ohio.

- Artist

John Hancock, chief of graphics, has worked for the *Dayton Daily News* since 1992. Prior to that, he worked for the *Philadelphia Daily News*, The Associated Press and the *Chicago Tribune*. John's graphics have been a fixture in numerous projects at the *Daily News*, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning series in 1998 on the military medical system. He is from O'Fallon, Mo., and graduated from The University of Missouri.

[From the *Dayton Daily News*: 12.01.2002]

How we did this project

Dayton Daily News

For *Down on the Factory*, the *Dayton Daily News* set out to collect lists of all megafarms in the country as well as data on how the states regulate large-scale livestock operations.

Very soon, we made two discoveries:

- Many states don't have lists of their megafarms, some aren't sure where they are, and those that do categorize livestock farms in such a variety of ways that data from different states are difficult to compare.
- Oversight of huge livestock farms, and the millions of tons of waste they produce, is a varying web of federal, state and county regulations. The rules, permit practices and even definitions change from state to state, sometimes from county to county.

The federal government, meanwhile, has handed the states a set of rules that focuses primarily on surface water. But huge livestock operations can also pollute groundwater and air, create odor, traffic and disease vectors, and spark conflicts about property rights, water rights and land use. So states have adopted a patchwork of regulations.

In compiling a comprehensive national database of regulations, the *Daily News* designed questions that attempted to encompass the universe of federal, state and county regulations. The newspaper contacted agencies in all 50 states, sometimes reaching numerous agencies and officials before finding answers. Only four states — Alaska, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Massachusetts — reported having no megafarms.

Several factors influence the way megafarms are regulated, including basic geography, legislative constraints and even the definition of what constitutes a large-scale livestock operation.

In many states, regulations apply only to operations with more than 1,000 animal units, the equivalent of 100,000 chickens, 55,000 turkeys, 2,500 hogs, 1,000 beef cattle or 700 milk cows. But exceptions include Vermont (>950 AU), Tennessee (>300 AU) and North Dakota (>200 AU). Most states use the federal definition of animal units, but Minnesota and North Dakota use their own calculations.

Given these variables, information on what is happening with megafarms nationwide is limited. Even the U.S. Department of Agriculture admits that it cannot determine the number of the nation's megafarms, known in the industry as Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations or CAFOs. Instead, it calculates estimates based on data for annual inventories and sales. Most state regulators were eager to talk about megafarm issues, offering answers about regulatory practices but also posing questions of their own. They wanted to know about problems other states are facing and best practices.

In short, they wanted a state-by-state comparison of current megafarm issues. With their help, the *Dayton Daily News* has created one.

For detailed results from each state click [here](#).

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.01.2002]

Activists label megafarm methods cruel but farmers argue tactics are humane

By Ben Sutherly
Dayton Daily News

Fold an 8 1/2-by-11-inch sheet of paper in half, and you'll get an idea of how much cage space the typical egg farm has been giving each of its chickens.

Those cramped quarters prevent normal bird behaviors such as wing stretching, dust bathing and perching.

But cages also keep birds out of their own feces and in small groups, reducing the risk of birds pecking each other to death. The mortality rate for caged chickens is almost always less than that for their cage-free counterparts because cages reduce cannibalism.

Identifying the most humane ways to treat animals on megafarms isn't always easy, and animal rights activists and farmers have long been at odds about the issue. But they do agree on one thing: American consumers need to know a lot more about how their meat, milk and eggs are produced.

Animal rights groups and small-scale organic farms with animals often label eating "a moral act." They assail egg farmers for cramming chickens into cages and hog farmers for confining pregnant pigs in metal crates so small the pigs can't turn around or lie flat. They decry the methods used to kill animals at slaughterhouses, calling them inhumane.

Some groups have gone to controversial lengths to draw attention to the issue. In August and September 2001, an Ohio animal rights group, Mercy For Animals, trespassed onto Buckeye Egg

Farm and Daylay Egg Farm after its requests for access reportedly went unanswered. The activists said they rescued 34 hens from the farms.

"We wanted to document that the inherent cruelties that animals suffer on factory farms is industry standard," said Nathan Runkle, the 18-year-old director of Columbus-based Mercy For Animals. "We thought there was no better way of doing that than by showing conditions at Ohio's two largest factory farms."

Farmers point out that mistreating their animals is counterproductive. John Rust, whose family runs Rose Acre Farms of Seymour, Ind., the nation's second largest egg producer, said the animal rights agenda is having undue influence on the average consumer.

"I don't think you should force a person who just wants cheap protein to pay a higher price just because someone else thinks a chicken is being treated poorly," Rust said.

His brother Marcus said many consumers welcomed cages in the 1970s because farmers could control their chickens' diet and produce cleaner, safer eggs.

Nevertheless, animal welfare experts have concerns about cages and other aspects of modern livestock and poultry production. America's egg industry as a whole, for example, has used inadequate methods to trim beaks and induce molts, they said. Methods used to induce a molt — a period of rest that spurs more egg production in birds — have come under fire because they deprive the birds of feed for four to five days or longer.

"Our committee found the method used to induce the molt currently was not acceptable," said Joy Mench, an animal science professor at the University of California at Davis and an animal welfare expert.

Molting also can weaken birds' immune systems and make them more susceptible to disease, though scientists still don't know how much risk that molting poses to food safety.

United Egg Producers recommends that producers who withdraw feed from birds not let the animals' body weight drop below 70 percent of the starting weight. UEP also recommends that mortality rates stay below 1.2 percent during the feed withdrawal period.

Under pressure from animal rights advocates, UEP in June introduced new animal welfare standards for the industry, part of a larger animal welfare program backed by the Food Marketing Institute and National Council of Chain Restaurants.

One new standard, which egg farmers began phasing into their operations in July, will increase space per bird to a range of 67 to 86 square inches by 2008; 48 to 54 square inches per bird was common industrywide until this year.

The new standard "brings us more in line with European regulations," said Mench, who serves on UEP's advisory committee.

The new standards are not mandatory, but the UEP's Ken Klippen said companies that own about 85 percent of the U.S. flock have adopted the standards. Those companies' farms will be audited by April to ensure they are following the guidelines, Klippen said.

Mench said the UEP's move is noteworthy. "Producers have voluntarily taken on something that's going to increase their costs," she said. "And they've done it as a group."

The new guidelines will reduce the number of birds that producers can house in their existing buildings. That concerns Bill Siefring, whose six chicken houses in northern Darke County had a

capacity of 885,000 birds until this year. By 2008, however, that capacity will drop 16 percent to about 740,000 birds.

"We've got a processing plant here that really needs a million birds to be totally efficient," he said. "We've got 15 people working here that want an eight-hour job. We need eggs to provide to this plant."

A 16 percent drop in birds will not mean a 16 percent reduction in eggs because the remaining hens will be more productive. But the drop in egg production will still be significant, and could make it difficult for Siefring to justify wages that are competitive with egg processing plants that are running at full capacity.

"What am I supposed to do then?" he said. "Do I close my doors because I can't find help to run my processing plant? Or do I have to figure out how to build more chicken houses to provide the eggs for the processing plant?"

UEP has developed a welfare seal for egg cartons so retailers and consumers can more easily identify certified eggs. Shoppers will begin seeing the seal in early 2003, Klippen said.

"Right now it's very hard for consumers to express their concerns," Mench said. "In Europe, there's a legally mandated labeling system. Consumers can go in and give the industry some guidance as far as their buying patterns."

What message American consumers will send the egg industry and other poultry and livestock producers remains unclear, but Marcus Rust of Rose Acre Farms said the response to his company's carton-marked cage-free eggs hasn't been overwhelming.

"Our experience to date is most consumers are intelligent enough to know not to spend the extra money," he said.

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.02.2002]

Ohio megafarms must be made to clean up

A Dayton Daily News Editorial

The old saw about barn doors being closed after the horses escape doesn't quite capture the sorry state of Ohio's regulatory efforts to corral factory farms.

The Department of Agriculture employs only six doormen, and that's up from the lonely two the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency had on hand before this year.

The six must cover the 139 factory farms that dot (or pock) Ohio's landscape. And those are just the farms that have deigned to take out a permit. Uncounted others are scofflaws that duck the regulatory radar altogether.

And no wonder. For nearly 20 years (1979-1998), so-called state regulators didn't bother to conduct *any* random *or* regular inspections. When they acted at all, it was only in response to catastrophic environmental incidents or when the din of complaints could no longer be ignored. So lax and *laissez-faire* is Ohio's regulatory environment that the state has become, in effect, a Dutch colony, with large agricultural operations from Holland setting up shop here. Egg-laying hens warehoused in Ohio factory farms number in the tens of millions. One mega cattle operation — with 9,000 head — alone generates 131,000 tons (that's 2.62 million pounds) of raw waste *each year*, double what's annually produced by Dayton's 166,000 residents. Travel to the concentrated mega-farms of nearby Mercer County — around Chickasaw and Coldwater. But be careful what you drink. Manure runoff from large livestock operations caused

the Ohio EPA to declare water quality at numerous testing sites severely compromised by fecal bacteria. Same for the fish quality, which is rated poor to very poor in many places.

If all this doesn't pose enough of a challenge for the six inspectors, there's more:

The inspectors are brand new. Only this year was the Department of Agriculture handed the reins over factory farms. The Ohio EPA had been in charge, and the oversight change required a new state law.

Critics say the law change was a legislative gift to the farm lobby, which sought a more reliably friendly oversight agency. Only time will tell how cozy the relationship becomes, and Agriculture Department officials say it will take a year or more before new systems are put in place.

Meanwhile, no one denies that corporate farm interests form one of the most powerful lobbies in Columbus — spreading around campaign contributions to Ohio Republicans, although not nearly as deep as their stockpiles of chicken, pig and cow droppings.

How the new Ohio regulators respond to this mounting evidence will reveal whether they place a similar value on the public interest and their reputations.

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.02.2002]

Who's keeping an eye on megafarms?

With regulations varying from state to state farms can often avoid scrutiny

By Mike Wagner, Ben Sutherly, Martha Hild and Ken McCall
Dayton Daily News

NEW WESTON | From the window of a small plane, the Rose family farm in northern Darke County resembles many of Ohio's large hog operations.

A gravel lane leads to four long, gray buildings; beyond them are two identical manure lagoons. The farm on North Star-Fort Loramie Road can house nearly 4,000 hogs, well above the 2,500-hog threshold at which the state requires a permit.

But the Rose farm doesn't have a permit. It never had one. And it doesn't need one. Legally, it is two farms.

A property line bisects the farm, with two buildings capable of housing 2,000 hogs on either side. Fred Rose owns one side; his son Roger owns the other.

The *Dayton Daily News* learned of two other Ohio farms divided the same way.

Although legal, the practice keeps state regulators from inspecting the farms to ensure manure and other aspects of the operations are handled properly.

"When you get a large amount (of livestock) in a small area, I'd like to see it regulated," said Fred Dailey, director of the Ohio Department of Agriculture, which now issues state permits to megafarms. "They probably aren't violating the law technically . . . but this is something we'd take to our livestock advisory committee and legislators for input."

Charlie Rose, Roger's brother, said the family talked about getting a permit, "but at the time it was taking over a year to get one." The family didn't feel it could afford to wait that long to build, he said.

The family has two other megafarms — an egg farm and another hog farm — that have permits. Rose said he has told the state the family is willing to get a permit for the hog farm.

Ohio and 30 other states have overhauled megafarm rules during the last four years to keep pace with the rapidly changing livestock and poultry industry. But despite the flurry of legislative activity, farms can sometimes avoid scrutiny, and the rules in many states fall short of ensuring that farmers run clean operations.

The *Daily News* contacted environmental agencies in all 50 states to examine how they regulate megafarms. Among the findings:

Of the 46 states that reported having megafarms, just 12 states require disclosure of past environmental infractions or do background checks before issuing a permit. And a dozen states don't have any regularly scheduled inspections, meaning a farm might never come under state scrutiny unless a complaint is filed. Many states don't even have a firm handle on how many farms they have.

Asked if he believes there are Ohio megafarms operating without a permit, Kevin Elder, director of the state's megafarm permitting program, said, "No doubt there are."

The General Accounting Office launched an investigation earlier this year to examine how the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regulates large farms. The results are due out in 2003, but early returns aren't very kind to regulators or to the performance of the EPA's federal permitting program for large livestock farms — the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System program. "The EPA's program or approach with (megafarms) is toothless, meaningless," said Greg Kosarin, assistant director for Natural Resources and Environment for the GAO.

"Until we started looking at this, we had no idea how large the size of the loopholes are in the permitting program. Even if a farm gets a (federal) permit, no one watches to make sure they are doing things the right way."

The EPA is preparing to unveil new regulations for megafarms Dec. 13.

Although families like the Roses can avoid a permit by dividing their farms with property lines, that doesn't always mean farms without permits fall under the state's radar.

"Anybody who raises hogs on contract has to get a waste management plan," said Carl Link, the production manager for Cooper Farms, which contracts with the Rose family for hogs. "Otherwise, we don't work with them."

And Elder said the Department of Natural Resources would enforce environmental laws at the Rose farm if it polluted.

"Just because they're not permitted doesn't mean they're not regulated," he said.
Environmental chess

In late 1999, Cimarron Pork shut down its hog megafarm near Marshall, Okla., leaving behind dead pigs and a leaking manure pit.

The cleanup so far has cost more than \$800,000 — and the state almost got stuck with the tab. Cimarron Pork agreed to do the cleanup after the state initiated court proceedings in 2000. Even existing laws, it seems, can leave communities vulnerable after megafarms are shut down. Oklahoma, like 39 other states, does not require its big animal farms to be bonded or provide evidence of financial responsibility. Nor does it have a cleanup fund earmarked for the farms. "We as a division have consistently said that's something we're probably going to need down the road," said Teena Gunter, attorney with the water quality services division of the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry. But, she said, "We just got word that we're going to have another budget cut."

In what has become a high-stakes game of environmental chess, regulators are struggling to write rules, find problems and tiptoe through a minefield of competing jurisdictions and interests. Federal regulations only address pollution of surface water, leaving groundwater and air issues to states. Meanwhile, land use, zoning, water rights and other issues are the responsibility of county governments in many states.

The aggressiveness of states, too, may depend on the political muscle of animal industry advocates. Many states with strong poultry industries impose fewer regulations on the handling of dry chicken manure.

"There's no doubt money buys influence," said Don Stull, professor of anthropology at the University of Kansas. "No doubt Tyson and other companies have the ear of our legislators." Virtually all states require nutrient management plans to reduce mismanagement of megafarm manure. Many states also require farms to address some combination of the following: odor, flies, rodents, traffic, noise, erosion, carcass disposal and biosecurity.

The states' vast regulatory spectrum reflects how the impact of large farms differs from region to region. Fragile or outstanding natural resources, suburban development and climatic factors such as annual rainfall all figure into a farm's impact and the extent to which a state regulates it. So do budgets. Ohio's livestock environmental permitting program was supposed to get \$1.7 million in state funding for this fiscal year, but budget woes reduced that to \$1.32 million.

The complexity of mass livestock and poultry farming also explains why megafarm regulations vary so much from state to state. In fact, 18 states have decided that running a megafarm is complex enough to require training for farm operators. Alabama requires 16 hours of training within the first year and eight hours each year after that.

To varying degrees, states try to penalize poorly run megafarms, but many also provide incentives for environmentally sound management. In states such as Missouri, North Dakota and Tennessee, bankers consider compliance when deciding whether to loan money to megafarm operators.

The 2002 farm bill also allots \$400 million — \$5.4 million for Ohio — to help farmers run environmentally sound livestock operations. Since 1997, farmers in Darke, Mercer, Auglaize, Shelby and Miami counties have received \$3.4 million through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program.

But in some states, the rules under which megafarms operate leave gaping holes. While companies such as Tyson Foods and Smithfield Foods have a major presence in several states, the *Daily News* found only four — South Dakota, Utah, Maryland and South Carolina — hold them liable for environmental damages caused by any megafarm that contracts with them. South Dakota's law is meant to hold accountable anyone who "negligently entrusts" the control of livestock to another person, said Kent Woodmansey of the state's environment and natural resources department. Woodmansey said the state has yet to use the 1998 law, but he said state legislators felt it was needed when several large pork producers began eyeing the state in the mid-1990s.

"It provides a little bit of protection for the operator as well," Woodmansey said. The federal government will issue new rules this month that states fear will cost too much, force livestock producers out of business and steamroll many of the rules crafted to meet their state's specific needs.

Several states have filed formal objections to the EPA's draft rules, which call for more frequent inspections and more farms to be permitted.

But California regulators said the proposed rules don't address groundwater protection, while others fear the program will have inflexible requirements for permits and record keeping.

"What we're concerned about is these handful of farms in the state of Delaware are going to have to throw away everything they've done in the past and get hit by a rubber-stamp program," said William Rohrer, the Delaware Nutrient Management Commission's program administrator. "Nobody seems to get out of their high-rise office and get out into the field to see what's happening like we've done."

Bill Siefring said too much regulation will make it harder for farmers like him to be good environmental stewards.

Siefring, who has more than 800,000 chickens at his Darke County egg farm, auctions manure twice a year and hauls much of what is sold at least 35 miles away.

He worries he won't be able to do that if regulations go too far. In March, Indiana passed a law requiring dry poultry manure to be spread or covered within 72 hours of being piled in a field to prevent runoff into creeks. That includes any manure from Ohio, and Siefring's farm is just six miles east of the Ohio-Indiana line.

Siefring fears Ohio will adopt a similar law. Although he makes up to \$9 a ton off his manure, that's not his primary reason for selling it.

"My main focus is to find a home for that manure," Siefring said.

Chicken manure is rich in phosphorus — about 100 pounds of it per ton. Many fields close to Siefring's farm already have enough phosphorus, and putting it there might aggravate the area's pollution problems, he said.

If regulations become too strict, "You're not going to be able to work with the insect control in piles," he said. "You're not going to be able to move it 30 to 40 miles away anymore. So we're going to be competing again with the farmer next door (who's) trying to get rid of his mess."
Ohio regulation: Before and after

For nearly two decades, hardly anyone was watching Ohio's big farms.

Ohio issued its first waste management permit to a megafarm in 1979; by 1998, the state had more than 100 permitted farms.

But during those years, state regulators in the EPA's five district offices only visited the large farms when they received a complaint, typically from neighbors about excess odor from the farms or a manure runoff into a ditch or creek.

The district offices didn't have staff members who were solely responsible for monitoring large livestock operations. And even after responding to a complaint and verifying manure spills or other problems, regulators rarely would follow up, push the farm to apply for a federal permit or issue a fine.

It wasn't until the end of 1998 that Ohio began conducting random inspections of its large farms. And even after the EPA shifted responsibility of regulating the large farms to its Columbus headquarters, only two full-time staff members monitored permitted livestock operations. Until August, no Ohio farm operated under a comprehensive federal permit.

Most farms want to avoid the U.S. EPA's national permitting process — NPDES — because it requires operators to file monthly reports to state environmental agencies showing a "demonstration of compliance." Those reports must report storm water runoff, depths of manure

pits and several other details — including proof that farmers monitor weather reports before applying manure to fields.

An Antwerp dairy farm became the first Ohio farm with an NPDES permit; eight or nine others have applications pending.

"I think we've improved dramatically in the past few years," said Christopher Jones, director of the Ohio EPA.

The state's new megafarm rules took effect in July, but state legislators didn't give the EPA more tools to police big farms. Instead, they handed the state's permitting program for megafarms to the Ohio Department of Agriculture.

The driving force behind the change was the Ohio Farm Bureau, which lobbied for years to give enforcement powers to the agriculture department.

Environmental groups, community activists and some legislators assailed the change. "When a power plant spills waste into a stream, you don't have the Public Utilities Commission regulating them," said Susan Studer-King of the Ohio Environmental Council, which led the charge against the regulatory switch. "So why should the Department of Agriculture be regulating problems with big farms?"

Jones said EPA has been unfairly criticized for its enforcement record.

"One of the issues that came with the transfer was that the Ohio EPA didn't understand large farms, and I think that is a mistaken impression," Jones said. "I would have liked to have had the opportunity to make more improvements in the program at Ohio EPA."

Under the new regulatory system, the agriculture department handles state permits; the EPA issues federal permits. The agencies are currently conducting joint inspections until the agriculture department is given authority to issue federal NPDES permits.

"It'll be at least a year" before the department gets that authority, Elder said. "And I'm being optimistic."

The agriculture department vows to be aggressive in its new role.

Under the department's rules, new and existing megafarms must obtain operating permits that are renewed every five years. The department plans to conduct background checks of new operators to examine their history of environmental compliance, and inspect the farms twice a year. The farms must also follow construction standards, and have plans for manure storage and disposal, carcass disposal, and rodent and insect control.

"The biggest thing is record keeping," Elder said. "Some of these facilities weren't required to keep records. They kept them up here," he said, pointing to his head.

The department now requires those handling manure at the largest megafarms to be certified. And the new rules also give the Ohio Department of Natural Resources the authority to take action more quickly against farms that are too small for a permit but cause harm to the environment.

The agriculture department has discovered at least one megafarm operating without a permit: a beef operation in Trumbull County with 8,000 cattle. The farmer was asked in September to shrink his herd below 1,000 until he obtains a permit.

Godfather of Ohio's megafarms

He's not a farmer, but no one in Ohio — and possibly the nation — has worked more closely with megafarms in the last 22 years than Tom Menke.

Regulation of the state's megafarms has been a work in progress for more than two decades, but there has been one constant in dealing with big livestock farms: Menke.

The Gettysburg agronomist virtually has a monopoly on doing consulting work for Ohio's megafarms. All but a few of the state's 139 permitted livestock operations have hired Menke as a consultant for their farms.

That means it is Menke and his two associates who write the permit applications when a farmer wants to begin operating a farm with more than 100,000 chickens, 55,000 turkeys, 2,500 hogs, 1,000 beef cattle or 700 dairy cows. It is Menke who reminds farmers of their obligations to conduct soil and manure testing and how to keep good manure management records. And it is Menke who often steps in to deal with state regulators when a farm has a problem.

"I understand the science of agriculture extremely well and I also made it my business to know the regulations very well," said Menke, who founded his consulting business in 1980. "I know the people, the farmers, the farm bureau folks, the folks in environmental agencies — so, yes, it has been word of mouth in building our business."

Menke has a total of about 400 clients, many of them crop farmers. But it's his work for the livestock operations that has made him controversial.

Even some regulators acknowledge being uncomfortable with Menke's status as the principal advocate for so many farmers.

"I think it is always healthy to have more than one perspective," said Jones, the state EPA director.

Menke charges anywhere from \$2,500 to \$5,000 for drafting permit applications, but that's about to change.

"We will have to charge a little more with the amount of regulation increasing," Menke said. Farmers who work with Menke said their operations — and the environment — couldn't have a better guardian.

"From what I know of him personally, he has the highest level of integrity," said Tim Weaver, president of Weaver Bros. farms. "He has never come to me and suggested ways for me to skirt the rules."

Menke declined to say how much his business is worth.

The consultant said megafarmers are easy targets for environmentalists and he plans to keep working to change the public's attitude toward big livestock farms.

"Farmers would rather be left alone to raise their chickens and hogs, and milk their cows," Menke said. "They are scared to death of a government agency coming on the farm . . . and they are thinking 'Oh gosh, what am I doing wrong?'"

"What I try to do is get the two sides to understand and communicate with each other so the farmers and the environment both win."

Laura A. Bischoff contributed to this story.

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.02.2002]

Illinois megafarm neighbors sound alarm on waste Inwood Dairy released more than 1 million gallons of refuse into ravine

By Laura A. Bischoff
Dayton Daily News

ELMWOOD, Ill. | From her basement home office crammed with clippings, documents and photos of hog and cattle farms, Karen Hudson fights an entire industry.

She fires off e-mails, issues press releases, organizes protests and neighbors, fetches water samples from ditches and streams and travels around the nation to make speeches.

For Hudson, it is a full-time job.

In her house she displays photographs of her with Willie Nelson and Robert Kennedy Jr. On her kitchen table: Erin Brockovich's book *Take It From Me*.

And like Brockovich, a legal secretary who uncovered a utilities cover-up and won \$333 million for the residents of a small California community, Hudson fell into environmental activism — and refused to quit even after someone dumped manure on her porch.

Why does she bother?

"We have the moral and legal high ground," she says matter-of-factly. "Because it's right and what they're doing is wrong."

In Illinois — dubbed the "Land of Stinkin' " by Hudson — activists have pushed to strengthen megafarm regulations while farmers have dug their heels in to make sure local governments can't block large livestock farms from building or growing.

Similar confrontations between industry activists and the people who run giant livestock farms have occurred all across the country. Hudson and her fellow activists have won a battle or two, but not so many that she feels she can turn off her computer and shut down her basement office. "There is local control (in Illinois) for low-level nuclear waste and garbage. But when it comes to 50 million gallons of raw urine and feces a fourth of a mile from my house, we don't have a voice. And there's no difference," said Hudson, who helped form Families Against Rural Messes in Illinois and two years ago joined the staff of New York City-based GRACE Factory Farm Project. "In fact, I think I'd rather live next to a garbage dump. . . . At least it's more regulated and my county board can control and decide if it's safe."

For years, Illinois had only basic laws covering agriculture operations — prohibitions against polluting rivers and creeks and vaguely worded requirements on how far manure lagoons had to be from neighboring property.

By the mid-'90s, Illinois saw small hog farmers go out of business while big swine operations got bigger. Activists sounded the alarm and caught the attention of state lawmakers, particularly after well-publicized problems in North Carolina, Minnesota and Missouri.

In 1996, Illinois passed a law requiring the state Department of Agriculture to inspect lagoons before, during and after construction, establish construction standards and clearly state lagoon setback requirements. Activists successfully lobbied for amendments in 1998 to add requirements for other waste systems and give opportunities for public comment on new megafarms.

But Illinois still lacks regulations requiring state approval of manure management plans except for very large farms, groundwater monitoring near farms and regular inspections of overall operations. State authorities don't even have a list or map of all the farms large enough to need a permit. In Illinois, the Department of Agriculture has much of the responsibility for regulating livestock farms — a model similar to one adopted this year in Ohio.

Under this regulatory structure, the state's Environmental Protection Agency is responsible for pollution problems, while the agriculture department handles the permitting process for new and expanding megafarms.

To Hudson, the arrangement doesn't make sense.

"The Department of Agriculture should not be promoting and regulating the same product," she said.

The state's regulatory system didn't stop the Inwood Dairy Farm from pumping more than 1 million gallons of waste into a ravine in early 2001 and polluting a nearby creek.

Hudson said the discharge is the largest deliberate release of wastewater in the state's history. Inwood Dairy is near Elmwood, a town of 2,000 people on the western edge of Peoria County. When the farm's seven-acre, 40-million gallon wastewater lagoon nearly overflowed, workers added sandbags around the top and owner-operator David Inskeep pumped 1 to 2 million gallons of wastewater through a hose into an 8-foot-deep ravine nearly a mile away.

The wastewater gushed into an adjacent pond and stream that led to the West Fork Kickapoo Creek. Stockpiled manure at a nearby feedlot operated by Inwood also began to run off into the creek.

"It was worse than I could have imagined. It never should have been allowed to get into that position that it did," said Hudson, who lives a few miles from Inwood. In February 2001, the Illinois Attorney General's office got court orders forcing Inwood's operators to stop using the brimming lagoon and cease pumping into the ravine.

But that caused other problems. Cow manure and water used to flush out the milking parlors formed a 4-foot-deep lake with another 1 to 2 million gallons of waste inside and outside the barns. Workers had to fence off the low end of the barns to keep the Holsteins from wading up to their udders in their own manure water.

"It was a big mess," said consulting engineer Terry Feldmann, who at one point stood in a row boat measuring the manure lake's depth with a surveying rod. "It was months of stuff, plus rainfall."

Illinois regulators have been documenting problems at Inwood Dairy for years. The Illinois EPA cited Inwood five times during two years for wastewater runoffs and discharges, rotten silage and odor.

Once operators pumped wastewater to the ravine, EPA inspectors visited the farm every day for 27 straight days in February and March 2001.

The multiple-investor business that formed Inwood Dairy in 1998 folded and Peoria restaurateur Albert Zeller remained as the sole owner. Inskeep left Inwood Dairy's ownership but still sells feed to the dairy and spreads manure for other farmers.

In May 2001, Zeller hired dairyman Jeff Trapp to run the farm and opened his checkbook to clean up the mess and rebuild the dairy. The state of Illinois chipped in \$300,000 for a system that breaks down manure and generates electricity from the gases.

The dairy, now called New Horizons Dairy LLC, has \$5 million to \$6 million invested in the cleanup, Trapp estimates.

Trapp said Inwood's problems could have been avoided. But, he said, with a criminal investigation pending he didn't want to point fingers.

The Illinois Attorney General's office declined to comment on any criminal investigation. Crop farmer Bill Wagner, who lives 3,300 feet from the Inwood lagoon, puts the blame on Inskeep, a retired Caterpillar businessman with no livestock farming experience, and the Illinois EPA. Although he's known Inskeep for more than 40 years, Wagner said Inskeep wouldn't listen to advice from him. And the Illinois EPA inspectors failed to force the dairy to make changes, Wagner said.

In response to his critics, Inskeep said, "All I can say is that we were always cognizant of the environment and never once was there ever anything done that was a deliberate attempt to do anything bad. You can hear all kinds of stories. You can call lots of people. If you call six people, you can probably get six stories. And, ah, you know, that's about all I can say."

Trapp said he's been busy cleaning up the farm and rebuilding neighbor relations, stopping weekly to say hello to nearby residents and taking them cheese and sausage gift baskets at Christmastime. Trapp says the PR campaign seems to be working because now his neighbors wave to him with all five fingers instead of just one.

Wagner said he appreciates Trapp's efforts.

"We do smell it now and then but it's not a septic sewer smell. It's a manure smell," he said. Despite the dairy's overhaul, Hudson isn't satisfied. Trapp is the third manager since Inwood began milking cows in late August 1998, she said, and the dairy has expanded to 1,500 cows and is still using the lagoon. For the mess it created, Inwood had to pay only a \$50,000 fine, she said. Hudson, a crop farmer, said Inwood Dairy is the "poster child" for what can happen when too many animals are concentrated in one place and the operator is a bad manager.

"The way our law is written and the way things are monitored, the bad actors are allowed to get by for quite a long time until there's a catastrophic event," she said.

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.02.2002]

Ohio Farm Bureau keeps agribusiness at forefront Critics charge group has stronghold at Statehouse

By Laura A. Bischoff
Dayton Daily News

COLUMBUS | On May 15, 1920, a gangly 28-year-old New Englander named Murray D. Lincoln started work as the first staff member of the newly formed Ohio Farm Bureau Federation. With two or three files, a bedside typewriter and two hotel rooms that served as both his home and office, Lincoln began building the state bureau.

Consider his mission accomplished.

The Ohio Farm Bureau today has offices in 87 counties, four full-time Statehouse lobbyists, 88 employees, slick brochures, an extensive Web site and a \$9 million annual operating budget. Executive Vice President John C. Fisher has a \$188,497 salary; the other nine top officers are paid an average of \$67,107.

Its political action committee spread \$222,544 to state office candidates in the 1999-2000 election cycle, ranking it ninth in the state for PAC giving. *Fortune* magazine ranks the American Farm Bureau, which has 5.2 million members, among the most powerful lobbies in Washington, D.C. Before Ohio lawmakers even think about farm bills, they look to the Farm Bureau for advice. "They are always organized. They run a really well-organized, well-informed group," said state Rep. Merle Kearns, R-Springfield, a member of the House Agriculture Committee.

Joe Logan, president of the 6,500-member Ohio Farmers Union, which represents small and medium-sized family-owned farms, put it bluntly.

"Very little happens in the Statehouse without its approval from the Farm Bureau." Logan's group — unlike the Farm Bureau — opposes corporate ownership of large animal operations.

The Farm Bureau's Statehouse lobbying team is smelling sweet success. After years of work, the agricultural industry persuaded the Ohio General Assembly and Gov. Bob Taft to shift regulation of large-scale animal farms from the Ohio EPA to the state Department of Agriculture.

Critics have charged that shifting megafarm regulation to the Department of Agriculture, which provides marketing and loan assistance to farmers among other programs, is akin to the "fox watching the hen house."

But Farm Bureau lobbyist Larry Gearhardt said it makes sense to have a regulator who is "familiar with the industry."

He also denied the bureau "wrote the bill," as some have alleged.

"We had input on what should be in the bill or not in the bill, but we certainly didn't draft the bill and say here it is and here's what you should pass," said Gearhardt, who lives in Covington in Miami County.

It's no secret that the bureau didn't like how the Ohio EPA handled megafarms. Farmers complained that it took too long to get an installation or operating permit, and that the EPA failed to establish rules on how the farms would be regulated.

Ohio Farm Bureau Federation President Terry McClure said Ohio needed the change so that livestock farmers, and the crop farmers who sell them grains, could continue to be viable operations.

Columbus-based environmental attorney Rick Sahli has a different theory. After environmentalists, concerned citizens and farmers began calling for written rules governing megafarms, agri-business got nervous, he said.

"The Ohio EPA began to put it in the annual action plan that they would go ahead and develop some regulations on this," Sahli said. "And then the agri-business lobbyists became terrified about, 'Oh, my God, Ohio EPA would develop rules, and we don't completely control the Ohio EPA.'"

Sahli said the Farm Bureau uses its clout to keep farm regulations to a minimum.

"The Farm Bureau has an extreme right wing ideology," he said. "They are even more anti-regulation than Ronald Reagan."

The bureau doesn't limit its lobbying to farming issues, reaching out as well into taxes, environment, trade, health and safety and wildlife policies. In the last two years, the Farm Bureau lobbied for a new law that puts a five-year statute of limitations on environmental lawsuits, a law

that provides tax credits and low-cost bonds for ethanol plant construction, and another law that establishes \$25 million for a farmland preservation program.

The Ohio Farm Bureau also has a business incubator to support start-up companies, a nonprofit foundation to give grants and scholarships and undisclosed financial investments.

"We look at a lot of issues. We try to be clear across the spectrum because we're really representing rural folks," said McClure, a Paulding County corn, soybeans and wheat farmer. "I mean, well (rural) school issues, we're very involved with that. We want our next group of farmers that come up to be very educated. We want a good education system. Our issues cut across a wide array."

Although it doesn't formally endorse candidates, the group's political action plan calls for campaign contributions and foot soldiers to get candidates elected, performance reviews for sitting lawmakers, voter guides, voter registration drives and get out the vote efforts.

"We want to get people that understand agriculture in the Statehouse. Our members want someone that understands what they're talking about when they come to talk to them," McClure said.

The bureau tends to support Republicans. On the federal level, the Ohio Farm Bureau's contributions went to GOP candidates more than 94 percent of the time in the last two election cycles, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

"The Farm Bureau in Ohio is incredibly powerful, particularly within the Republican Party structure," Sahli said.

McClure said the bureau tries hard to be nonpartisan.

"We also tend to give to people from the rural areas who, by happenstance, happen to be Republicans at this time," he said. "I don't imagine that's too unusual in organizations. It's about like-mindedness.

"It's more about like-mindedness than it is about being partisan."

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.02.2002]

Megafarm fights to compete Big farms driving small independents out of business

By Ben Sutherly
Dayton Daily News

Wayne Twp., Darke County | Melvin Stucke leads me down a corridor of cages so vast I can't see the other end.

Five-watt fluorescent bulbs fastened to the sheet-metal ceiling dimly show the way, as well as the imprints left by our boots on the dusty catwalk. Placed along the catwalk's edge every few steps are pieces of black corrugated drainage tile with rat poison inside to kill rodents.

It's hard to hear each other over the house's 85,000 chickens. At times, their din seems as raucous as the incessant cawing of thousands of crows.

Yet at 444 feet long, House No. 1 is the smallest of four hen houses at Stucke Beef & Egg. The largest, No. 4, is 604 feet long — longer than two football fields — and home to about 115,000 birds.

"If you walk (all the corridors in) this house, you'll walk a mile," Stucke says of House No. 4.

We pull on leather gloves for this task, one of the few that haven't been automated in today's high-tech, high-rise hen houses. The egg industry calls it "mortality pickup." Here at Stucke Beef & Egg, they call it "dead-birding."

Disposing of the dead is part of life on this Darke County farm, just as it is on the Miami County dairy where I grew up and on any livestock or poultry farm. It was part of life in the 1940s, when Stucke's family had a 20-by-40 foot house for 300 chickens. On a megafarm, numerous chores, including dead-birding, are simply multiplied many times over.

The modern egg farm's magnitude and complexity became clear to me during a week of work in April at Stucke Beef & Egg, though the farm is small by today's standards. In April, it had 285,000 chickens and 990 beef cattle. Some commercial egg producers house millions of chickens at one location.

I was drawn in part to the Stucke farm not by its size, but because it's one of the few independent egg megafarms left in Darke and Mercer counties; most have contracts with Fort Recovery Equity or other giant egg companies. Because Stucke Beef & Egg has no contract, it has borne the full brunt of nearly four years of depressed egg prices.

Stereotypes of "family farm" and "factory farm" blur at Stucke Beef & Egg, just as they do at dozens of farms within an hour's drive of Dayton. Imposing at first, the farm retains a certain intimacy as father, mother, son and son-in-law go about their daily routines.

The Stuckes still call the 78-acre farm where they keep their chickens and cattle home. Melvin Stucke's son, Mark, and his family live in the farmhouse where he grew up. Melvin and his wife of 43 years, Mary Ann, built a new house on the farm 15 years ago.

Mary Ann and son Mark often start their morning chores together, feeding cattle in the shadow of four silos, the tallest of which towers more than 100 feet above the family's 1 1/2-acre feed lot. Melvin Stucke sometimes spends his mornings at work in the chicken houses. With 51,552 cages to check daily, he and a handful of hired helpers can't afford to give each one more than a passing glance.

Stucke walks the corridors of cages and chickens deliberately, his pace like that of a shopper pushing a grocery cart down an aisle between stops. Only instead of a grocery cart, Stucke pushes a small red wheelbarrow as he scans the cages to our left. I scan those to our right as I bring up the rear. New to the job, my eyes move up and down the 6-foot-tall wall of cages more slowly than his. After a few minutes, I lag behind. Stucke stops the wheelbarrow and walks back to me, checking cages on my side. Then he returns to the wheelbarrow and picks up on his side where he left off.

Like eggs, dead chickens tend to be pushed out front, making them easier to spot. Sometimes it takes a good tug on the handle to open a cage's wire door. Before it opens, a skittish, squawking feathery mass barrels to the back of the cage.

Layers are light — mature birds here weigh 3 1/2 to 3 3/4 pounds. I hand the dead ones I find to Stucke, who puts them in the wheelbarrow. Occasionally, it takes an extra yank or two to free dead birds whose toes still clutch the bottoms of their wire cages.

As Stucke walks the barn, he is doing much more than looking for dead chickens. He assesses the live hens' health, scoops up the occasional bird that escaped a cage left open, and keeps an eye out for any bird that may have caught its wing or head in the space beneath the feed auger. He listens for chirping, which can indicate respiratory problems.

"Even something as simple as dead-birding has management connected to it," Stucke says. "I go through them to check them the same as the cattle."

He records in a notebook the number of dead chickens found in each row and in each house. "You need to keep track of the mortality count so you know how many live birds you have in the house" and how much to feed them, he said.

Stucke removes birds that appear ill or near death and puts them on the catwalk. If they get up, they go back in a cage. If they don't, he picks them up, turns his back to me, gives their necks a quick yank and puts them in the wheelbarrow.

The life of a layer

Chickens arrive at Stucke Beef & Egg as day-old fluff balls, spending their first 16 to 17 weeks growing into 2 3/4-pound pullets in the pullet house. Then workers, using semis and dollies, haul them a stone's throw down Ohio 185 to the main farm.

Three weeks later, inside two-story hen houses, the hens begin a life of laying eggs. On days when they're in full production, the farm's 285,000 birds eat about 30 tons of ground corn, soybean meal and a poultry supplement. They drink about 14,250 gallons of water daily from red cone-shaped waterers, though consumption varies with egg production and temperature. Ground-level exhaust fans four feet across pull air down from the cage area above, over the manure piles below and out of the barns. Fresh air enters the buildings near the eaves, cooling the birds and flushing ammonia and other potentially toxic manure byproducts from the building. Negative air pressure can vary slightly from barn to barn, creating air movement in the walkways. During my week at the farm, I gradually became indifferent to doors slamming behind me as I passed between hen houses via walkways connecting their upper floors.

Chickens lay eggs in decks of wire cages stacked four-high; their manure piles up below. Each cage houses five to six chickens and measures 16 inches by 20 inches, or 320 square inches — an area equal to seven columns in this newspaper.

A curtain covers the back of the cages, deflecting droppings into the piles below. Once a year, 2,000 tons of manure is hauled from the hen houses and spread on some of the 3,000 or so acres amassed by Stucke, his son Mark and his son-in-law Luke Osterloh. The manure is typically spread onto fields after the soybean harvest each fall, then chisel-plowed into the ground.

Manure demands intensive management. I understand why after spending a morning at the pullet house with Melvin and Mark Stucke cleaning dust-caked louvres and fan frames. Inside enclosed walkways next to the pullet house's ventilation fans, flies blacken areas of the cool concrete floors, barely moving or motionless.

To control flies, the Stuckes spray the manure with an insecticide before spreading it on their fields. They use a feed additive called Larvadex to reduce the fly population in the houses, but only sparingly so the flies don't build resistance. They also try to establish colonies of darkling beetles, which eat fly larvae in the manure. "They're very beneficial in the house," Melvin Stucke says of the beetles. "But they're a nuisance once you move the manure out of the house."

We finish cleaning the banks of fans at the pullet house shortly before noon. By then, the air has warmed and the flies are abuzz — everywhere.

During the short trip from the pullet house back to the main farm, we shoo flies from the cab of Stucke's pickup.

A 'friendly' molt

In April, the Stuckes halted egg production in House No. 1 by cutting the flock's feed by half and putting less protein in what remained.

The induced rest, called a molt, typically begins when the chickens are 65 weeks old, Melvin Stucke said. It lasts six to eight weeks, during which chickens lose lots of feathers. The house is kept dark for much of the day to discourage egg production and irritability among the birds. The molt is meant to give chickens just enough energy to maintain themselves, but not enough to put toward producing eggs. After a molt, which occurs naturally in the wild, the chickens grow new feathers and resume egg production at a higher rate.

Animal rights groups have assailed the industrywide practice, saying that depriving chickens of feed is an inhumane way to eke more eggs from them. Under pressure, McDonald's required its egg suppliers to stop forced molts in early 2001. And the United Egg Producers this summer announced new animal welfare guidelines that included a "friendlier" molt ration. Most of the nation's largest egg producers are following the guidelines, though critics contend the voluntary measures do not guarantee better treatment for all birds.

Changes were made at Stucke Beef & Egg this summer. The birds in House No. 4 ate a new "friendly molt" ration for four weeks.

"It's a low-protein, low-salt feed," Melvin Stucke says. "About all that's in it is corn with just a little bit of poultry supplement and a small amount of calcium."

The molt in House No. 4 was a first for the Stucke family in another way: It was the first time the family molted a flock twice. With low prices making it hard to justify a new batch of hens, the family instead decided to coax more eggs from the hens in House No. 4. Most birds go to slaughter when they are two years old and their egg output tapers off. Many are shipped to a slaughter plant in Canada to become soup meat; others go to a rendering plant and become ingredients for animal feed.

The birds in House No. 4 have resumed production, and are now 122 weeks old. Following an egg

An egg's journey to the supermarket begins when a chicken foot bumps it, sending it meandering down the cage's gently sloping wire floors.

Chances are good that it will make the trip without ever coming in contact with a human hand. At cage's edge, the egg rolls onto a 4-inch-wide conveyor belt, which moves east at two to 10 feet per minute. An egg in House No. 4 will travel as little as a few inches or as much as 584 feet before it funnels into a "de-escalator," a descending escalator that cradles the egg between plastic fingers while lowering it to a conveyor 12 inches wide.

Eggs laid in House No. 4 transfer from that conveyor to a conveyor 18 inches wide in the walkway between House Nos. 2 and 3. The wider conveyor then transports the eggs and others from House Nos. 1 and 2 to the packing room, where they are prepared for shipping. Stucke Beef & Egg packages nest-run eggs — eggs that have not been sorted by size.

In the packing room, which smells of wet concrete, an electric eye mounted on the conveyor just above the eggs occasionally emits a shrill beep. That alerts employees if the eggs become too crowded and begin piling up as they round a curve and line up in an orientator.

Water warmed to 115 degrees washes the eggs, which then get a cold rinse. Used wash water is stored in a 33,000-gallon tank, then spread on a nearby alfalfa field.

After their bath, the eggs are candled — a job so called because it was once done by candlelight. At Stucke's farm, the worker who is candling leans over a table and scrutinizes eggs as they pass, 12 abreast, under lights.

The worker methodically grabs eggs that need to be rewashed, as well as jumbos and those that are slightly cracked. Eggs with damaged membranes, called "leakers," are hurled into 5-gallon buckets.

Just past the candling area, a machine called a denester dispenses plastic flats one at a time. A packing machine's clamshell-shaped fingers clasp eggs and set 30 in each flat. A machine then stacks the egg-filled flats six-high.

A second worker places the stacks of 180 eggs on a wooden skid. A dozen stacks — 2,160 eggs — together make one layer on a skid. A full skid has five layers — 10,800 eggs that weigh about 1,500 pounds. Jumbos and slightly cracked eggs are placed on the very top to keep breaks to a minimum.

A third employee uses a battery-powered forklift to move the skids of eggs to a 1,500-square-foot refrigerated room. The eggs are usually stored there at about 45 degrees for one to three days. Then they are loaded into refrigerated semi trailers, with 60 percent to 70 percent of the eggs bound for a breaker plant in Zanesville, where the eggs are cleaned, broken and shipped out in liquid, frozen or dried form.

The feed lot

Even if the Stuckes had no chickens, their farm still would house almost enough animals to require a state permit.

In addition to producing eggs, the Stuckes fatten beef cattle for slaughter. In April, they had 990 head of cattle — farms with 1,000 head are considered megafarms. Livestock farms have become specialized in recent decades, but Stucke Beef & Egg is an exception. And four years of depressed egg prices have shown the wisdom of staying diversified. Nearly 50 years after Melvin Stucke's father, Frank, got in the business of fattening cattle, the family feeds out 1,800 head annually. The cattle weigh about 800 pounds when they arrive at the farm by semi, 60 at a time. Most come from pastures in Virginia or the Carolinas, but some come from Kentucky or in-state. At Stucke Beef & Egg, the cattle's diet consists of corn gluten, dried corn, silage, high-moisture shelled corn, lime, protein additives, a bit of hay — and even a few eggs.

Every other day or so, a resourceful Melvin Stucke hauls buckets of broken eggs in the back of his pickup to feed to the cattle. He fills a plastic container with the mottled yellow liquid, which dribbles onto the cattle feed as it passes beneath on its way to the bunks. Feeding the broken eggs to the cattle is one way to get rid of them while still putting some of their nutritional value to use.

My first day at the farm, I help vaccinate a group of cattle that just arrived at Stucke Beef & Egg. Two hired hands and I herd the group of 60, a few at a time, into a sturdy corral of creosoted posts connected by 1-by-6 boards.

We treat the animals for viruses and shipping fever in a headchute at the end of the corral. Each animal also is treated with a de-wormer and gets a shot to help prevent overeating and indigestion from their new diet. An implant inserted in each animal's ear makes them gain weight more efficiently.

Twice each day, the cattle stand at two bunks measuring 300 feet and 250 feet long and devour seven to eight tons of feed. It takes 180 days or so for the Stuckes to fatten the cattle to 1,350 pounds — a rate of gain of about three pounds per day.

About 90 percent of the Stuckes' cattle are black, with a few Holstein beef feeders and Herefords mixed in. Better than half of the cattle yield certified Angus beef, Melvin Stucke says. Each year, the Stuckes bed their cattle with more than 250 tons of straw and feed them about 750 50-pound square bales of hay.

A lagoon at the feed lot's south end holds up to 1.2 million gallons of manure and water that rain washes off the feedlot. "We don't push anything into it," Mark Stucke says.

Instead, the Stuckes haul manure from the feedlot once a week, weather permitting. Beef cattle on high-energy diets such as corn each produce about 80 pounds of manure per day. That means a herd numbering 990 produces about 277 tons of raw manure a week.

An uncertain future

When Melvin Stucke put up a high-rise hen house for 60,000 chickens in 1978, he was at the vanguard of the egg industry's consolidation.

Stucke even held an open house for his hen house. He recalls the community's reaction was mixed. One prominent local poultryman who was still gathering eggs by hand said something that stuck with him: "You're starting out with more layers than I've ever had, and you're going to put us out of business."

A generation later, that fortune-telling has come full circle. The Stuckes have four times more chickens than what they had in 1978. But now their egg business is competing against more efficient giants and enduring a fourth year of depressed egg prices.

In the early 1990s, when the Stuckes had 400,000 birds and processed eggs, their egg farm yielded profits of 50 cents to \$1 per bird, Melvin Stucke says. Now the family's egg business is losing money; income from the cattle and crops subsidizes it.

Two years ago, the family gutted one of the farm's four high-rises after deciding that restocking it with birds was too expensive.

"We're trying to keep a couple houses open, but I can't tell you today how that's going to be done," Stucke says. "Profitability has shifted from production to processing, marketing and transportation."

Expanding into those areas comes with significant building, equipment and labor costs — costs that are often prohibitive for smaller egg farmers like the Stuckes.

"You have to have enough eggs to make it worthwhile," Stucke says.

Melvin Stucke processed eggs for 15 years, but he stopped in 1998 rather than spend \$750,000 to replace worn, outdated processing equipment. Stucke figures he needed 750,000 birds to justify the cost. Besides, he says, it was hard to find good help outside his family. And to get processed eggs certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, he would have had to spend more than \$50,000 a year on an egg inspector.

But giving up egg processing has left Stucke Beef & Egg at a competitive disadvantage. Stucke does the math: Every dozen eggs that leaves his farm costs his family a penny or two extra to pack and three to four cents extra to ship somewhere else to be graded. That means it can cost the family up to six cents more than some competitors to produce a dozen eggs — a huge difference in a business that measures profits in tenths of pennies.

To stay in business, Melvin Stucke may become a contract producer and give up a fundamental trademark of farming: independence.

"I've been independent for 65 years. It's hard to switch at this time," Stucke says. ". . . Whether I'm right or whether I'm wrong, I've always liked to make my own decisions."

But today's industry isn't giving him or any other egg farmer much choice.

"The small independent," he says, "I don't think there's going to be too much of that left in another couple years."

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.03.2002]

Mercer, Darke heritage keeps farming a family affair Acre for acre counties produce most eggs in nation

By Ben Sutherly
Dayton Daily News

FORT RECOVERY | When he's not running Second National Bank's branch in Fort Recovery, Steve Badgett helps his wife, Mary Ann, tend to more than 100,000 chickens at their Mercer County egg farm.

Livestock production doesn't just drive the local economy here. "It's a way of life," said Badgett, who produces eggs for local contractor Cooper Farms.

It's no coincidence that the area between Greenville and Celina is home to both dozens of cross-tipped churches and more than half of the state's megafarms. German-Catholic farmers settled much of the area between the 1830s and the 1880s. Their culture's strong tradition of succession explains why many farmers turned to labor-intensive livestock farming as a way to get their children involved in agriculture.

Livestock has become the lifeblood of many multigenerational farms here. Farmers have found they can make more money off their acreage by converting field crops into milk, meat and eggs. Livestock therefore has become a strategy for generating more income, especially since World War II, when many young men returned home to their family's farm.

"One of the big things now is 'value-added' agriculture" said Joe Beiler, Ohio State University agriculture extension agent for Mercer County. "What's more value-added than putting corn through a cow or chicken or turkey and producing another product?"

When the poultry industry began consolidating in the 1960s, northern Darke and southern Mercer counties were fertile ground for contract farming. Today, livestock farming in the area is intensive; acre for acre, the two counties together produce more eggs than anywhere else in the nation. Livestock also has firmly established the two counties as Ohio's agricultural titans. Mercer County farms had sales of \$270 million in 2000; Darke County farms had sales of \$221 million. Only two other Ohio counties had total farm sales that year of more than \$100 million: Wayne County (\$169 million) and Licking County (\$128 million), home to the nation's fourth largest egg producer, Buckeye Egg Farm. In Mercer County, livestock and livestock products such as eggs and milk accounted for 82 percent of agricultural sales; in Darke County, 69 percent.

"A lot of my customers who have worked on the farm have been able to send their kids to college," Badgett said. "Livestock is a source of revenue that has enabled a lot of people to do that."

It also has enabled a younger generation to farm fulltime like their parents did.

Charlie Rose, 39, said he and his brother both were able to quit their factory jobs to produce eggs and hogs for Cooper Farms.

"It's Wal-Mart style," Rose said. But, "It's a way to stay on the family farm."

Marie Osterholt, 39, said raising turkeys on contract for Cooper Farms lets her stay at home with her five kids. Her husband, Mark, also raises hogs for Cooper and works as a mechanic at their farm southeast of Fort Recovery.

"It's a nice part-time job," she said.

Livestock farming creates a stark difference in the rural landscape between northern and southern Mercer county, OSU's Beiler said.

"You see a lot of barns up in that area that are not used. The barns are falling down," Beiler said of northern Mercer County. "You go down to southern Mercer County, and you can drive down the roads and see some nice brick homes." Money from poultry, hog and dairy income built those homes, he said.

Folks around Fort Recovery see livestock as a major reason why the town of 1,300 still has three banks. Many local jobs depend on livestock, including those at Fort Recovery Equity. Located on the north side of town, the nation's ninth largest egg company employs 165 people and has an annual payroll of more than \$3 million, said President Bob Gornichec.

Large chicken houses border the town's industrial park, home to Fort Recovery Equipment Co. The company, which builds complete housing systems for chickens, hogs, turkeys and dairy cows, grew from \$1 to \$2 million in sales in the mid-1980s to \$14 million by the mid-1990s as local livestock production boomed, said Cy LeFevre, the company's president.

Other local businesses, from farm equipment manufacturers such as J&M Manufacturing to manure brokers and chicken handlers, have forged a strong agricultural infrastructure in the region. Cooper Farms' turkey processing plant is the largest employer in nearby St. Henry, providing about 400 jobs. The company's name even graces the northeast side of the village's water tower.

Many German-Catholic farmers take pride in keeping their farmsteads tidy. LeFevre said local farmers often can tell if a property is owned by so-called "Yankee" farmers, whose farmsteads tend to have "woolly," unkempt fencerows.

Competition among farmers for land in southern Mercer County is fierce. After all, locals say, it may only come up for sale once in a lifetime.

"Old German farmers collect farmland," LeFevre said. "It's just like you and I collecting classic cars."

But it's more than an expensive hobby. Recently farms in Mercer County have fetched about \$6,000 an acre — a princely sum for ground that is being farmed, not developed.

"You just wonder how much higher it can go," local auctioneer Rick Uhlenhake said of the price of farmland.

Pride in the local poultry industry is palpable each June in Versailles, a community surrounded by independent, family-owned megafarms such as Roll Turkey Farm and Weaver Bros., an egg producer. The annual Poultry Days festival draws an eclectic mix to the Darke County village of 2,600. While locals serve an estimated 26,000 barbecue chicken dinners, 70 teams of Ultimate Frisbee enthusiasts from as far away as Houston and Denver flock to Heritage Park for one of the sport's largest tournaments nationwide.

Each year during the festival, one young lady is crowned "Miss Chick."

"A couple of years, play has stopped on the field when Miss Chick has come out," said Mark Simons of Clarksville, Md., a Versailles native and one of the tournament's founders.

Simons' great-uncle, Paul Gasson, started Poultry Days 50 years ago. Gasson's father, John, got into the poultry business in 1907. His company, Gasson's Poultry Farms, evolved into a multimillion-dollar company and helped cement Versailles' reputation as a leader in the poultry industry before it closed in the late 1960s.

"His main product was not the eggs, but the baby chicks that he sold," Mark Simons' mother, Evelyn, said of her grandfather. "He sold baby chicks all over the United States, even in some foreign countries." Most of the chicks were shipped from Versailles by rail, but some were sent by air freight, she said.

"I don't think he would have approved" of today's egg farms, Evelyn Simons said of her grandfather. Back in his time, she said, "The fly problem, the odor problem and the manure problem were not a problem."

Mercer County Commissioner-elect Jim Zehringer acknowledged that a lot of his future constituents are concerned about chemicals from manure polluting water, and that the problem needs to be addressed through education and increased use of grass filter strips.

But agriculture's importance to the local economy can't be overlooked, he said.

"It's our No. 1 industry," said Zehringer, whose megafarm produces pullets on contract for Fort Recovery Equity.

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.03.2002]

Egg producers face harsh reality: Grow or go out of business Industry giants leave little room for competition

By Ben Sutherly
Dayton Daily News

Consolidations, acquisitions, and cutthroat competition — three hallmarks of American business — have left few companies standing in the U.S. egg industry.

"Fifteen years ago, there were 2,500 egg producers," said Ken Klippen, an egg industry lobbyist. "Today, there are fewer than 300."

Many commercial egg producers still frame the future in stark terms: grow or go out of business. Egg companies that owned at least 5 million birds accounted for 44 percent of the U.S. flock in 2001, up from 27 percent a decade earlier. The nation's top two egg producers, Cal-Maine Foods of Jackson, Miss., and Rose Acre Farms of Seymour, Ind., together had 36.4 million birds in 2001 — more than Iowa, the nation's top egg producer.

Iowa surpassed Ohio as the No. 1 egg state two years ago and has since widened the gap. Its flock was estimated in September at 37.7 million birds, about 23 percent more than Ohio's 30.6 million. Most of that growth has come through farmer cooperatives and other large egg companies putting up complexes that each house millions of chickens.

During the 1990s, Iowa became a magnet for egg production for several reasons, said Kevin Vinchattle, executive director of the Iowa Poultry Association and the Iowa Egg Council. The state leads the nation in production of corn and soybeans — two primary ingredients in chicken feed.

"Why pay to move the energy source halfway across the country?" Vinchattle said. Iowa also leads the nation in the number of eggs processed, and its location about midway between the East and West coasts makes it attractive for egg distribution, he said. The state also has plenty of land on which to put poultry manure. Some Ohio producers say the phenomenal growth in Iowa's egg output has contributed to the nation's egg glut, which has depressed prices since Easter 1999. But Richard Brown, who tracks egg and egg product prices for America's oldest commodity market news reporting service, Urner Barry Publications of Toms River, N.J., takes a broader view.

"Producers will always point a finger at whomever's growing production," Brown said. Like the rest of agriculture, the egg industry is cyclical, alternating between periods of boom and bust, Brown said. The years 1995 to 1998 were marked by good prices, spurring overproduction that sent prices plummeting.

"The (down) cycle this time around in eggs has been longer and deeper than normal," Brown said. By late 1999, low egg prices put Fort Recovery Equity in Mercer County on the verge of bankruptcy. The nation's ninth largest egg producer, which is owned by 68 contract egg farmers and pullet growers, asked its contract egg farmers to accept 2 cents less per dozen eggs for three months — a forfeiture of almost 30 percent of their egg income.

The state stepped in, investing \$12 million in reduced-rate certificates of deposit at banks that have loans with Fort Recovery Equity's contract producers. Because the banks did not have to pay the state as much for the use of its money, they could cut loan rates to producers in Darke, Mercer and Auglaize counties. A low-interest guaranteed loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and deferred interest rates from banks also helped "the Equity" stay afloat, despite losing contracts for about 1 million of its 8 million chickens.

Since then, the company has made fundamental changes, focusing exclusively on its core business: eggs.

To do so, it shed its side businesses — contracting hogs, retailing feed and grain marketing — and formed a marketing company with Moark LLC, the nation's eighth largest egg producer. Under the agreement, Missouri-based Moark is distributing and marketing the 660 million eggs produced annually by the Equity.

The company also invested \$2.5 million to convert a former fertilizer and seed storage building into a 40,000-square-foot plant that processes 144,000 dozen eggs a day, said Bob Gornichec, the Equity's new president. The plant allows the Equity to process more than half of its eggs in-house, important in the egg business because graded eggs in cartons typically fetch at least 20 cents a dozen more than nest-run eggs, or those that haven't been sorted by size.

Other large egg farms also have expanded their businesses beyond basic egg production. Many commercial egg producers sell eggs in the carton directly to supermarket chains and break others on the farm before shipping the liquid in tanker trucks for use in cake mixes and other processed products.

New animal welfare guidelines could lead to more consolidation.

Farmers who choose to follow the new guidelines must put fewer chickens in their existing hen houses. Fewer chickens mean fewer eggs, increasing the cost of production.

Egg farmers are hoping a drop in egg production will drive up prices and compensate them for thinning their flocks. But the largest producers may just expand to fill the void, which in turn could keep prices down and further squeeze competitors.

Tim Weaver, president of Weaver Bros. in Versailles, said thinning his farm's flocks in existing barns by 20 percent through 2008 will raise his cost of producing a dozen eggs 8 to 11 cents. Weaver Bros. built two new barns after an August 2000 fire at a Weaver Bros. farm east of Versailles killed 250,000 chickens.

With the new standards, Weaver said his company will have to build again to ensure a steady supply of eggs to its customers, which include national and regional grocery chains and local independents.

But with egg prices low, some producers may think twice about expanding; a barn capable of holding 100,000 chickens can cost \$1.2 million to \$1.3 million.

"If we have to expand our building and equipment capacity by 20 percent, that's a significant capital outlay," Weaver said.

Martha Hild contributed to this report.

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.03.2002]

Nasty turf wars erupt Explosive megafarm growth often pits communities against farmers

By Mike Wagner and Dale Dempsey
Dayton Daily News

EECH GROVE, Ky. | The two trucks carrying the chicken carcasses slowed as they passed the small cemetery where Bernadine Edwards was burying her husband, Billy.

The stench was picked up by a light breeze and filtered its way through the small memorial service a few hundred feet from the rows of long silver chicken houses.

"Even after he was in the ground they couldn't let us have no peace," said Edwards, whose house sits on a hill across from the cemetery and the 16 chicken houses owned by Tyson Foods Inc. "It's like a war down here between people who think we need those damn chicken houses and those of us who want them to go away."

Since her husband died in 1999, Edwards said she has been constantly harassed by workers who operate the chicken farm across the road: Her dog was poisoned, nails and dead chickens were left in her driveway, someone pounded on the outside walls of her home late at night and a bullet was fired through her kitchen window.

Stirman Adams, the man who runs the 16 chicken houses for Tyson, said no one from his family or any of his workers has ever harassed Edwards.

"I'm not saying those things didn't happen to her, but we had nothing to do with any of it," said Adams. "I knew the memorial service for her husband was going on that day, so we called and told everyone to not bring feed trucks or anything down that road."

The explosive growth of megafarms — big farms housing thousands of chickens, hogs, turkeys, beef and dairy cattle — pits neighbor against neighbor, farmer against farmer and sometimes family member against family member.

Turf wars are erupting in dozens of states as giant livestock farms increasingly bump up against smaller farms and sprawling housing subdivisions. States are scrambling to write rules and enact standards, but anger is building on both sides about the impact big livestock is having on the environment and the rural way of life.

"I've seen serious riffs," said Don Stull, professor of anthropology at the University of Kansas. "There have been shootings over (megafarms) in Kentucky. This shows you the level of anger that's present in these communities."

One woman's war

Mary Gibson has been angry for 14 years — ever since Park Farms Inc. began raising 100,000 broiler chickens across the road from her Canton horse farm. Gibson has complained of flies, respiratory problems and assorted other grievances. Chemicals from the farm burned her dog, she said; mice ran up and down the blue drapes that hang in her well-appointed living room. "It is a lifetime of woe, living next to a CAFO," she said, using the acronym for Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations or megafarms.

But Gibson also knows how to raise a fuss. Just ask James A. Pastore Sr.

"She complained from day one," said Pastore, whose family owns Park Farms. "If she makes an official complaint, the agencies have to come out and investigate. Mary knows that and uses it." Files of Gibson's letters and complaints stuff the record drawers of the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Agriculture, state and local health departments, township trustee offices, zoning boards, the Ohio General Assembly, courtrooms, the Farm Bureau, environmental groups and local newspapers. She has stacks of documents, letters and information on large-scale farming operations, dating back to when Park Farms located across the street.

Gibson blames her neighbors for everything from the dead trees on her property to the rats and mice that scurry under the floor boards and climb up the drapes in her living room. Pastore and the Stark County health department say that the rodents came from the Gibson's horse barn — a charge that brings Gibson out of her chair.

"There is feed in the barn, and I've never seen a rodent run from a known source of food to where there isn't any," she said.

Gibson saves most of her venom for state regulators. She said citizens have little or no redress against bad behavior because regulators fail to closely monitor the farms.

She discovered some of the limits in the Ohio law when she sought information on Park Farms' waste plans.

Gibson wrote Ohio EPA Director Christopher Jones in October 1999, seeking the logs Park Farms maintains on its poultry waste.

In his response, Jones told Gibson the EPA did not have those records because the farm wouldn't provide them.

Jones wrote: "Ohio EPA can only enforce the requirements that apply to these facilities, which as you know are limited at this time."

The Ohio Department of Agriculture, which took over regulating large farms in August, hopes to clarify the regulations. The department is requiring all large operations — including Park Farms — to re-file for new permits.

But for Gibson, the switch to a new regulator just means she has to change the address on her letters to the state.

"I'm not doing this for me," she said. "I'm doing it for all of us, so we know we're eating well and can breathe the air."

Pastore said his family has always run a clean operation. Like most farm operators, the Pastores were small farmers long before becoming megafarmers.

James Pastore's father started his chicken business in 1946 as a storefront operation, selling to the German, Italian and Jewish families in Canton. The company grew into a chicken processing operation, buying birds from local farmers around Canton.

But as those families started selling off their farms in the postwar suburban boom, Park Farms had to look for new sources of chickens, turning to West Virginia and Georgia, Pastore explained. In the late 1960s, Pastore's suppliers started to market their chickens directly, cutting out the middleman. Pastore had to find a new supply.

"We had 300 employees," he said. "We saw the handwriting on the wall. Our suppliers had become our competition. We felt we had two choices: just quit or become aggressive. We had good people working for us and paid high wages."

So, in 1988 Pastore bought a parcel of land on Ohio 44 — close enough to Canton to have water and sewer service — invested \$15 million and went into the industrial farm business. It was the perfect location, except that it was across the road from Mary Gibson's farm.

Gibson said her daughter Elizabeth won't bring her two daughters to visit because of chemicals she thinks are coming from the chicken operation. She said that she and her husband, David, returned from a vacation in Florida and almost immediately started having respiratory problems.

She's also had trouble selling her property.

"We've tried to sell it for market value, but there are no takers," she said. "It was not a cheap property when we bought it."

Battles about megafarms are growing because of complaints from neighbors like Gibson, said Susan Studer-King of the Ohio Environmental Council. Studer-King has been following the issue for four years and sits on the agriculture department's rule making committee.

"My phone rings off the hook every day from citizens and groups wanting to know how these farms operate and what they can do about them," Studer-King said. "I've worked with over a dozen citizens groups and the pattern is the same; first there is a lot of enthusiasm with rallies and organization, then frustration sets in."

Farmers fight back

In the rolling green hills of Chatham County, N.C., Timothy Craig and his wife Wendy had a simple choice when their plans to open a farm with 5,000 hogs was attacked by neighbors and community officials — give up or fight.

They chose to fight for more than six years.

The Craigs bought the farm in 1994 but didn't stock their five covered barns with hogs until February 2000. During that time, the Craigs were embroiled in a battle with neighbors and the court system.

Their 200-acre farm is more than a mile from the nearest road and has no nearby neighbors except for a chicken farmer. Their manure lagoon spans more than an acre and can hold five million gallons of hog waste, but there was no evidence the Craigs were a threat to the local environment.

That didn't matter much to local neighbors.

"If you let one of those things in, then a whole bunch more are on their way," said one Chatham County resident who opposed the Craig farm but didn't want to be identified. "It wasn't personal, we just didn't want all those hogs around here."

North Carolina, after enduring years of environmental problems with hog farms, has strict regulations for any farm with at least 250 hogs. The state's rules bar waste lagoons or a hog house from being within 1,500 feet of a home, 2,500 feet of a school, church or hospital and 500 feet of any well for a public water system. The state has had a moratorium on new hog operations since 2000.

But Chatham County wanted to enact even tougher regulations on hog farmers, and the Craigs were the main targets of the proposed rules.

"They didn't want us here," said Craig, 39, and a father of three kids. "If you can't put a hog farm up here where can you put one? We have never had a problem with our operation, but some people will do anything to try and drive livestock farmers away."

The Craigs' court case went all the way to the North Carolina Supreme Court, which earlier this year ruled that Chatham County's strict hog farm regulations were unlawful.

The victory meant that the Craigs could keep their hog farm and the state's 100 counties couldn't pile more regulations on hog farmers. But the end of the court case hasn't brought unity between people in this small farming community.

"It's a social, economic and cultural divide between people who were here and the people operating farms now," said Tommy Emmerson, president of the local agribusiness council and a friend of the Craigs. "Some people here tried to lynch Tim's farm, but they didn't win."
'Paul's Lake'

Megafarm operators often complain of lost income from meddling neighbors, particularly when opponents go to court to block expansion plans.

But sometimes the opponents, too, can suffer financially.

In March 1953, Paul and Treva Reeser bought a 69-acre farm east of Greenville, dug out three lakes, and opened a private fishing and camping area dubbed "Paul's Lake."

"It was Mom and Dad's lifelong dream," said Tom Reeser of Dayton. "It was stocked with bass and catfish."

In April 1983, Weaver Bros. chicken farms bought an adjacent 115 acre farm and began a laying and egg-washing operation. By the summer of 1984, three chicken houses were producing more than a million pounds of chicken manure and egg wash wastewater. Paul's Lake was never the same.

In July 1985, a neighbor told the Reesers, "Hey, you ought to go see your lake." As Tom Reeser recalls, the largest of the three lakes was covered with a green scum.

"The fish were sticking their heads up through the scum, trying to get air," he said.

The result was a massive fish kill that devastated the fishing camp and set off a decade-long legal battle. The Reesers believed that the contaminants, mostly nitrogen and phosphorus, came from the Weaver Bros. chicken operation.

In 1988, a Darke County court agreed and awarded the Reesers \$200,000 in damages. However, the case was appealed on five counts and the appeals court reversed three of them. It was

remanded back to the Darke County Court in 1990. Weaver Bros. and Reeser reached an out-of-court settlement before it was retried.

"The property had to be appraised as farmland, and the state statutes said you can't be awarded more than the property is worth," Reeser said. "But the lakes were worth far more than the land. The estimated cost of restoring the lake was \$2 million."

Reeser said he has spent \$250,000 of his own money on that lawsuit. In August of this year Reeser sued Weaver Brothers again about another fish kill. This time, he said 90 percent of the lake was covered with chicken manure.

Tim Weaver, president of Weaver Bros., said the company is getting a bad rap.

"Reeser has filed over 60 complaints and the EPA and Soil and Water have not found anything we've done wrong," he said. "What other company has had to go through 20 years of scrutiny and allegations? It is very unfair. We go out of our way to be good corporate citizens. It has been kind of emotional for me and my family."

Weaver Brothers was started in 1929 by Weaver's grandfather, in the heart of what has always been chicken country in Darke County.

"It's why we have Poultry Days every summer," Weaver said.

Like others in the chicken and egg business, the company had to grow or go out of business, according to Weaver. "There is a lot of competition in this state with foreign companies coming in," he said. "We had to become more vertically integrated just to survive."

Weaver said he attempted to make peace with Reeser.

"I went down and talked to him, welcomed him to thoroughly investigate our operation and said we can work this out," Weaver said. "A year later he sued me."

The '2000 Mouse Event'

Howard MacGregor is surrounded by hundreds of apple and peach trees as he whittles a real Texas longhorn on his back porch in Dawson Springs, Ky.

The 62-year-old MacGregor has the fruit orchard and life he always wanted, but it was nearly destroyed two years ago by thousands of mice who invaded his property after running out of food at the two chicken houses across the street.

"The fields looked like waves moving in the water because there were so many mice moving across," MacGregor said. "They ate up a lot of my fruit trees and damn near put me out of business because the customers were afraid to come up here and buy any peaches. I had mice running over my customers' feet."

In what is known as the "2000 Mouse Event," MacGregor and other neighbors living across from two breeder houses were overrun by mice after the houses were cleaned. When a chicken house is cleaned the feed bins are also emptied, shutting off the food supply for the mice. Mice associate light with food and run toward any building that has lights on.

Unfortunately for MacGregor, that included his property.

"I would set up 20 mouse traps and within 15 minutes they were filled," he said. "And if I didn't change them right away the mice would start eating the dead mice."

But there's a twist to this confrontation between the people on opposite sides of the fence post. MacGregor considers the O'Reilly family, the people who take care of the 22,000 chickens, good neighbors. And the O'Reillys feel the same way about the MacGregors.

"The thing with the mice was bad, but there haven't been any other problems. They are real nice people," said Steven O'Reilly, who runs the two houses with his mom. "I've eaten some of his peaches and apples. They're good."

MacGregor said he would rather not live next to a big livestock farm, but the chicken houses haven't ruined life on his orchard.

"No one really likes chicken houses or the other big animal farms," MacGregor said. "But we have to learn to live with them."

But an hour's drive up the Pennyryle Parkway in western Kentucky, Bernadine Edwards and Stirmann Adams continue to live in conflict.

"There is the horrible smell, the flies that are everywhere and the mice that get in my walls," said Edwards, a school bus driver who said she refuses to move off of her property. "They spray (manure) as thick as they can get it right on the fields in front of my house."

The dispute for Edwards can even be found within her own family, which rarely gets together anymore for Sunday evening dinners. Her son Vince became a grower for Tyson in 1998 and now operates 20 chicken houses.

"I know she doesn't like what I do, but I do things the right way. Not all of the growers do that," said Vince. "I don't come to dinners as much any more because I'm busy running those houses and tending to my family, not because I don't like my mom."

Adams said that Edwards and a few other people have tried to make life as miserable as possible for his operation, which handles 400,000 chickens when the houses are full.

"Food is got to be raised for the American people," he said. "If you can find a better way to do it you could make a fortune, but right now this is the best way out there."

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.04.2002]

Bob Evans wary of production driven farms Sausage baron touts year-round cattle grazing

By Ben Sutherly
e-mail address: ben_sutherly@coxohio.com
Dayton Daily News

RIO GRANDE | Peering from beneath the brim of his trademark Stetson, Bob Evans drives his Lexus through a roadside ditch to reach a field of miniature round hay bales.

When it comes to cattle, not much gets in Evans' way these days. He's on a mission at age 84. He may have made his name in the restaurant business, but the retired sausage baron just might make his biggest mark by keeping folks down on the farm.

Some livestock farmers are bent on producing more, but Evans is sold on the idea of spending less. He's convinced the age-old but often disregarded practice of grazing cattle year-round will be the small farmer's salvation, particularly in southeast Ohio.

"There's nothing in my lifetime that's ever been as good for the farmer as this," Evans declared.

High unemployment is chronic here, and the region's chief cash crop, tobacco, is fading fast. But the Appalachian foothills are well-suited for grazing cattle — Evans called them "an unfair advantage" this summer while giving a tour of his Hidden Valley Ranch 120 miles southeast of Dayton.

At the risk of displeasing large equipment dealers, he wants farmers to forgo tractors, balers and harvesters that sport five- and six-figure price tags.

Grazing herds can gather their food, after all. Outside, they need no bedding. And they scatter their own manure, reducing or eliminating the need to haul it from barns or pits in manure spreaders or tankers.

"The cow does the work," Evans said.

In the process, they exercise more and become leaner.

"The animals that are on pasture resemble athletes," said David Zartman, an animal sciences professor at Ohio State University who researches grazing. "They're more sure-footed." That's especially significant for milk cows, which often develop foot and leg problems on concrete, Zartman said. Cows kept in confinement also are more susceptible to mastitis — an inflammation of the udder caused by infection — because their udders are more likely to come in contact with manure.

Zartman said the cull rate, or turnover, of milk cows can run 30 to 35 percent annually at confinement dairies. That rate is considerably lower — 18 to 22 percent — among milk cows that are kept on grass, he said. Lowering the cull rate saves farmers money because they have to raise fewer replacement animals to maintain milk production.

"This management system, as opposed to a confinement operation, really is better for the animals," said Ed Vollborn, a retired Ohio State University Extension agent recently hired by

Evans to do grazing research.

What's good for the cow might be good for the consumer, too. Grazing proponents note that grass-fed cattle have more of the fatty acid Omega 3, which may reduce the risk of heart disease. A grass diet also gives beef a different, more varied flavor than the uniform taste of corn-fed meat with which American consumers are familiar. Whether the flavor is better or worse depends on who you ask.

Grazing has two other advantages, Zartman said. Done right, it is environmentally sound, and nonfarmers often view it as the way farming ought to be.

Some sacrifices go with grazing milk and beef herds. Beef cattle don't gain weight on pasture as quickly as they do on corn. Similarly, Zartman said a corn-fed cow that gives 20,000 pounds of milk per year may only give 17,000 to 18,000 pounds when fed grass. Still, he's confident that better reproduction rates and lower culling rates more than compensate farmers for that loss in production.

Grazing also makes for a different work environment and lifestyle, Zartman said. It is management-intensive and requires less labor and fewer employees at a time when many farmers are struggling to find good, cheap help. Also, most dairies that rely heavily on grazing are seasonal dairies. That means a farmer stops milking all the cows in his herd for a few weeks as the cows prepare to calve.

Synchronizing the cows' lactation cycles gives farmers a break from milking for several weeks during the winter. That's significant in an era when most farmers — and their spouses — are unwilling to be tethered to a milk parlor 365 days a year.

Many farmers already graze their beef herds for part of the year. But Evans and others believe extending that grazing season with winter-hardy but nutritious grasses and plants can further cut equipment and labor costs and increase profits per head. Bobby Shugert of Cambridge both cut his expenses through grazing and expanded his herd to spread out his remaining costs. The 36-year-old cattleman grazes 1,500 cows on 15,000 acres in Guernsey and Belmont counties, about two-thirds of it reclaimed strip-mine ground. He keeps his cattle in 10 groups and rotates them among 120 different paddocks, each with 50 to 500 acres.

"Grazing seven months a year and feeding hay the other five months was just way too expensive," Shugert said. "It just wasn't viable to stay in the beef business without reducing costs."

So Shugert extended his herd's grazing season and slashed the amount of hay fed per cow per year — from three tons to less than a ton.

"It saves us about \$100 a cow by doing more extensive grazing," he said. Had he known in 1948 what he knows now, Evans said he never would have begun making sausage to serve at his 12-stool, 24-hour diner in nearby Gallipolis, the precursor of today's chain of roughly 500 full-service restaurants in 22 states.

"I'd have been in farming."

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[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.04.2002]

Buckeye Egg Farm violations among worst in country Megafarm has history of ignoring environmental laws

By Dale Dempsey and Laura A. Bischoff
Dayton Daily News

Robert Bear and his wife Rosella used to host the Bear family reunion each summer. But that was before the Buckeye Egg Farm cranked up its operation across the road from his Wyandot County farm in the mid-1990s.

"In 1998, I had to put plastic over all of the tables to keep the flies off," Rosella said. "We had it one more year, and then we had to quit."

Dan Perkins, 75, said he didn't get to watch his grandsons ride the tractors on his Licking County farm this year.

"They wouldn't come out anymore," said Perkins, whose property borders a Buckeye Egg farm. "This year, the flies were the worst they have ever been. I've put out all kinds of traps and fly strips, thinking I could stop them there, but they covered the garage."

Buckeye Egg, the state's largest egg-producing operation with 115 barns and 14 million chickens, has earned a national reputation — for environmental irresponsibility.

Since Germany native Anton Pohlmann bought 2,300 acres of central Ohio farmland in 1978, the giant egg business has angered neighbors, activists and state officials by repeatedly flouting the state's environmental laws.

Following an April fly outbreak of "Biblical proportions," Attorney General Betty Montgomery called the company "the most recalcitrant corporate polluter" her office has seen.

Litigation involving Buckeye Egg has been nearly nonstop since the state filed its first lawsuit against Pohlmann in 1983. The Croton-based company has been cited for contempt of court nine times for not living up to terms of lawsuits filed by the Ohio attorney general's office.

Yet Buckeye Egg continues to operate and draw nuisance complaints. In October, the U.S. EPA ordered Buckeye Egg to test for dust emissions at three of its egg production facilities. The EPA issued the order because of Buckeye Egg's alleged failure to comply with a January 2001 EPA request.

Susan Studer King of the Ohio Environmental Council said when she talks to environmental groups around Ohio, people assume Buckeye Egg Farm is out of business.

"They are surprised when they find out it's not," she said.

The regulatory noose appears to be tightening, however.

At a press conference in April, Montgomery announced she would seek a court order to jail Pohlmann and shut down his business, while Ohio EPA Director Christopher Jones said he would try to revoke the farms' operating permits.

State regulators won a partial victory in July, when Licking County Common Pleas Court Judge Greg Frost ordered Buckeye Egg to start closing one barn every other week beginning in August. But Frost rejected the state's request to jail Pohlmann, saying there was no proof he personally caused the problems. By that time, Pohlmann had returned to Germany and put his farm up for sale.

The Ohio Department of Agriculture took over regulation of megafarms in August. Environmentalists opposed the change, arguing the department was too close to the farmers it was now supposed to be policing.

But Fred Dailey, the agriculture department director, vowed to continue EPA's efforts to revoke Buckeye Egg's permits. Saying he had "crossed the Rubicon" with Buckeye Egg, Dailey issued a complaint outlining 87 permit violations.

The detailed list included spills, collapsing walls, fish kills, misapplying egg wash and manure to fields, failing to remove manure in a timely manner, piling up dead chickens outside a building, and failing to control manure moisture that created a breeding ground for flies.

In an interview with the *Dayton Daily News*, Dailey said, "I don't need another Anton Pohlmann. If I get somebody like that, I jeopardize this program."

But a Dailey comment to a National Public Radio interviewer in September caused critics to question the regulator's hard line on Buckeye Egg.

"We've had animal rights activists involved, and some environmental activists that simply want all of these facilities shut down," Dailey said. "My goal is not to shut down Buckeye Egg Farm. My goal is to have it managed responsibly."

The Ohio Environmental Council immediately wrote a letter to Gov. Taft, asking if his administration still planned on shutting down Buckeye Egg.

Dailey has since gone to great lengths to explain the comment, including writing letters to the editor to major newspapers around the state.

"I say it again: The careful due process of revoking Pohlmann's permits continues in our department's scheduling of a legal hearing on the matter," Dailey wrote on Nov. 3. "His farm is up for sale. If there is no buyer, we intend to shut the farm down."

The hearings to revoke and deny permits for Buckeye Egg began Nov. 25 and are scheduled to last through mid-December.

Buckeye Egg is currently being managed in compliance with state regulations, said David Armentrout of Compliance Consulting Association, the Middletown firm that took over the farm's management.

"We've made significant changes in all areas of environmental compliance since we took over in May 2002," he said.

Armentrout said that the company this year has spent in excess of \$350,000 on environmental measures. A U.S. EPA order to conduct air samples at three facilities will cost another \$500,000, he said.

Jones said he doubts anyone could step in and fix Buckeye Egg's problems.

"From my perspective, I don't see another buyer coming along and stepping into their shoes," he said.

Neighbors like Perkins blame state officials for letting problems go on this long.

"The government agencies just stood by and watched this happen," he said.

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.04.2002]

Lucrative megafarm market lures Europeans Foreigners pulling up roots and migrating to America in droves

By Ben Sutherly, Mike Wagner and Laura A. Bischoff
Dayton Daily News

CONVOY | Jan-Hinnerk Morisse listened to lively exchanges in German, Dutch and English as camera-toting farmers sipped soft drinks and munched cookies in the big dairy's break room. Old World farmers are coming to America — again.

Morisse traveled more than 4,000 miles from his farm near Wersabe, Germany, to learn more about large-scale dairies in the Midwest. After a weeklong tour of farms in August, he was poised to join dozens of other foreign farmers who have built large dairies in Ohio, Indiana and Michigan. "I only have my parents. It's a good moment to sell," said the 25-year-old Morisse, who owns a dairy with his father in Germany. "In Germany, you have to get permission for everything." Vreba-Hoff Dairy Development LLC arranged for Morisse and 15 other German farmers to visit dairies recently built by Dutch immigrants. The Michigan-based company began importing Dutch farmers in 1998, and now is luring dairy farmers throughout Europe.

Henk and Helma Arts, who built their dairy with Vreba-Hoff's help and moved their family from the Netherlands two years ago, patiently answered the Germans' questions, explaining how they contract with local farmers for grain and hay for their 699-cow herd and communicate with their Spanish-speaking employees.

"The biggest reason for us to leave the Netherlands is it's very hard to expand," Helma told the German tour group in English. "It's a small country. Their regulations, they are hard to follow over there."

Besides, she said, "Our son really wants to become a farmer."

Drawn by affordable land, less restrictive environmental regulations and seemingly boundless opportunities to expand, European farmers are pulling up roots and migrating to America in droves. Already, 28 large dairies have opened in Ohio, Indiana and Michigan; 11 more are under construction or about to break ground. Vreba-Hoff officials expect to relocate 20 more farmers to the United States in the next two years.

Vreba-Hoff has helped relocate more Dutch farmers to Ohio than any other state. Some say Ohio reminds them of home, but that's not the only reason so many are choosing to come here. Nearly three times the size of the Netherlands, Ohio has fewer people.

Building barns in America is less expensive. There are no milk quotas here limiting expansion. And Dutch farmers who come to the Midwest leave behind some of the world's toughest environmental regulations.

Home to 14 million hogs, 108 million chickens, 4.2 million cattle and 1.4 million sheep, the Netherlands has one of the highest concentrations of livestock in the world — so high that Dutch policy mandates reducing the pig population by 10 percent. Livestock farmers are banned from applying manure in autumn and winter, and from putting manure on frozen ground. They also must inject their manure into the soil and follow strict requirements for ammonia emissions. Land in the tiny European nation of 16,033 square miles can sell for as much as \$20,000 an acre. That gives farmers a big incentive to head for the Midwest, where an acre of productive farmland can still be had for \$2,000 to \$3,000.

Overseas, Dutch farmers sell their government-issued milk quotas in a way similar to the reselling of liquor licenses in the United States. They can earn \$800,000 to \$900,000 by selling a milk quota for 50 cows, providing dairymen with a nice down payment to set up a larger farm in America.

But the infusion of Dutch farmers in the Midwest has some regulators concerned.

Virtually all the Ohio dairies are built to house just under 700 cows. The state requires farms with 700 milk cows to get a permit, which opens them to inspections and forces operators to have a written plan for handling manure.

Environmentalists also believe the Vreba-Hoff dairies intentionally kept their farms below 700 cows until the Ohio Department of Agriculture in August assumed authority of the megafarm permitting program from the state's Environmental Protection Agency.

At least five Dutch dairies in Ohio have received environmental violation notices from the Ohio EPA, primarily for manure spills into creeks and storm water runoff. The Arts dairy was cited for polluting a creek and killing 8,000 snails in December 2001.

"We have not been happy with how they've operated," said Christopher Jones, director of the Ohio EPA. "We've started to do a number of inspections on them and seen some consistent problems."

On Wednesday, the Ohio Environmental Council sent a letter to Gov. Bob Taft asking him to halt construction on new Dutch dairies until all current Vreba-Hoff farms comply with the state's environmental laws. The council also wants the dairies to apply for federal pollution permits, which would place the farms under more scrutiny from regulators.

"We are aware that factory farm problems are not restricted to just the Dutch dairies," wrote Susan Studer-King, outreach coordinator for the council. But she said the Vreba-Hoff dairies warrant extra scrutiny because they were constructed "to circumvent state regulations."

Environmentalists in Michigan have also attacked large dairies, saying they're not committed to protecting local waterways. Janet Kauffman, a member of the Environmentally Concerned Citizens of South Central Michigan, noted that big dairies have invested millions of dollars in equipment.

"If they can put that kind of money into protecting the milk, why can't they put that kind of money into protecting the streams and ditches?" Kauffman said. "They call it a state-of-the-art manure handling system, but it's not. It's put-it-in-a-pit and spray it on fields."

For now, Vreba-Hoff dairy farms are just shy of being classified as megafarms. But nearly all of them have begun to expand — or are expected to expand — to more than 1,000 cows. The Arts dairy has built a new barn as it prepares to expand its herd to 2,000 cows.

Helma Arts said the dairy's environmental problems have been solved. "We are watched very, very carefully," she said. "One of the reasons we do so many tours is so people see how clean and nice it is. And the cows are happy. It's not really a factory — the cows are happy here." Vreba-Hoff officials acknowledged some of their dairies have had problems with manure runoff, but they said the violations were isolated incidents and have been addressed. Like many big farm operations, Vreba-Hoff supports having the agriculture department run the state's permitting program.

"We have a good relationship with the Department of Agriculture," said Cecilia Conway, a member of the Vander Hoff family that founded the Vreba-Hoff company.

Conway said the agriculture department's regulations are tougher than the EPA's. "All of our farmers realize how much scrutiny that they're under, and they've tried very, very hard to operate them well," she said.

Inside a Dutch dairy

The hostas, marigolds and bikes in front of the Arts dairy may be reminiscent of the Netherlands, but the scale of the dairy operation behind the milking parlor's brick facade is thoroughly American.

Three times a day, six Latino employees milk 600 cows. The cows generate enough milk each day to fill a 6,000-gallon milk tanker truck. The family's break-even milk price: \$12 for every 100 pounds. Every dollar above that generates an additional \$230 of profit per cow per year. Between milkings, cows lounge in free stalls bedded with sand under 14 large fans and nearly an acre of roof. A mechanical pulley system keeps the aisles behind the stalls free of manure, scraping it to the center of the barn. From there, the manure is flushed down a trough into a lagoon that holds up to 2 million gallons of liquid.

A tractor pulls a wagon capable of holding 1,050 cubic feet of feed down the center of the 365-foot-long barn. Holsteins stick their necks through stanchions and devour the feed as the wagon deposits it in rows.

The Arts family is building a 20,000-square-foot barn as they prepare to expand their herd to 2,000 head. They've also put enough feed in storage for their growing herd. Helma Arts said the family this year packed away 3,000 tons of uncured hay and 8,000 tons of corn silage, in addition to the 2,500 tons of silage the family already had in storage.

The scope of the Ohio operation dwarfs the farm in the Netherlands where Henk and his father once had seven cows. But with millions of dollars invested in buildings and equipment, he said the new dairy is hardly the culmination of the American dream.

"It isn't a dream," he said. "It's a big risk."

One-Stop Shopping

To set up dairies in the Midwest, all European farmers need to do is dial up Vreba-Hoff's office in a strip mall in Wauseon, near the Michigan border. That, and see their banker.

For a fee, Vreba-Hoff scouts the land, builds the barns, buys the cows and equipment, lines up grain farmers to supply feed and land to spread manure, and provides technical advice. It also helps families navigate immigration, get Social Security numbers and deal with other relocation issues.

"It makes it a lot easier to go through Vreba-Hoff," Helma said.

On average, the cows, buildings, equipment and fees run about \$2.5 million — excluding the land price.

The catalyst behind the migration of foreign dairy farmers is a family-owned company with roots in the Netherlands.

The Vander Hoff family runs Vreba-Hoff's two big dairies in Michigan, a leasing organization and its development arm. Four brothers, two sisters and three cousins — two in the Netherlands and one in the United States — own the company's holdings.

Stephen Vander Hoff immigrated to America in 1960, and worked as a farm hand and truck driver before buying a small dairy in Holland, Mich. The family went large-scale when it built its first big dairy — Vreba-Hoff I — near Hudson, Mich., in 1998. They spent \$14 million to build Vreba-Hoff II, an identical dairy down the road, in 2001.

Both dairies are designed for 3,000 cows and are high-tech, using transponders on the cow collars that relay milking information on each cow to a computer database; a chill system cools the milk from 101 to 36 degrees in two minutes.

Each farm generates 16 million to 18 million gallons of manure per year, which is spread on 5,000 to 6,000 acres nearby, said Stephen Vander Hoff, the elder Vander Hoff's son and the manager of Vreba-Hoff II. Each farm produces 18,000 to 19,000 gallons of milk a day, putting the farms among Michigan's top 10 dairies, he said.

Such huge operations draw attention. Vander Hoff said 3,000 people attended an open house for Vreba-Hoff I, and groups are constantly calling to set up tours.

"I'm proud to be a farmer. I'm proud of what I'm doing," he said. "There's nothing better than waking up every day and loving what you're doing."

While Vreba Hoff I was under construction, family members saw an opportunity to build dairies for immigrating Dutch farmers. They started Vreba-Hoff Dairy Development LLC in 1998 and began recruiting clients. The company works closely with Willy Van Bakel, a cousin and a real estate broker in the Netherlands who also sells milk quotas. Van Bakel tells Dutch dairymen looking to move about Vreba-Hoff Dairy Development.

The courting began slowly, but now Vreba-Hoff has a steady stream of potential clients. Conway said the company conducts tours three times a year, each one with about 15 couples. The clients fly into Detroit or Chicago, tour farms in Indiana, Ohio and Michigan, hear from milk marketers and feed organizations, and get a pitch in both English and Dutch from Vreba-Hoff staff before returning home.

Vreba-Hoff isn't the only company looking to bring Dutch farmers to America. Real estate representatives from Michigan, Wisconsin and Washington attended an annual trade show in the Netherlands, and South Dakota is recruiting Dutch dairymen, Conway said.

She said Vreba-Hoff hopes to eventually build a dairy on the 5,000 acres it purchased outside of Columbus — land that had been proposed for the Darby Wildlife Refuge.

Conway doesn't believe Dutch families have come to the United States because environmental regulations are less strict than those in their home country. Most Dutch dairy farmers just want a chance to be competitive, make a good living for their children and continue milking their cows, she said.

"This is what they know how to do, and they want to keep on doing it," she said. "So they are looking for opportunities outside their home country, and most of the farmers who we've built farms for have looked at other countries prior to coming to the U.S."

No Welcome Sign

The land is brown and flat in every direction, divided only by the dusty County Road C that weaves around the drought-stricken fields.

This is home, and almost heaven, to Jeroen and JosŽ Van Wezel.

Three years ago, the Dutch dairy farmers spent more than \$15,000 traveling to France, Sweden and Canada in search of a new place to milk cows. But it wasn't until they made one last trip that the couple decided to move their three young children to Ohio's Putnam County from a tiny village in Holland, near the Belgium border.

"I know people here think this is the middle of nowhere, but after one day here and seeing all the land that wouldn't cost us everything . . . we knew this was home," said JosŽ. "We are dairy farmers. Our parents were dairy farmers. Their parents were dairy farmers. It's who we are, what we do and it's what we will always be."

The Van Wezels' move to the United States is typical of foreign livestock farmers spread throughout Ohio's countryside. They left family behind. They spent \$1 million for an investment visa. They borrowed millions more to start up their dairy. They began running a farm 10 times bigger than what they used to manage. And they weren't welcomed by neighbors. With help from Vreba-Hoff, the Van Wezels arrived in America in February 2000. They trained, worked and lived near Vreba-Hoff's operations in southern Michigan for about 18 months before opening their own 650-cow dairy farm late last year.

But while the Van Wezels, both in their early 30s, were making plans to build the dairy, their neighbors were making their own plans to kick the Dutch couple out of the neighborhood. Led by Kathy and Dave Burkhart, neighbors in the tiny farming community of Miller City formed the Citizens of Putnam County for Clean Air & Water Inc. specifically to combat the Van Wezel farm.

The group collected more than 100 signatures on a protest letter sent to the Van Wezels. When that didn't work, the group, along with another citizens group opposing a separate Vreba-Hoff farm, filed a motion in federal court asking a judge to halt construction.

The judge dismissed the request, but that group hasn't gone away.

"We felt it would adversely impact the quality of our lives, pose threats to our water, the air we breathe and our home values," said Kathy Burkhart. "That's all proven to be true. That farm

turned neighbor against neighbor. We used to be a tight-knit community — now we are on two sides."

The Van Wezels said an overwhelming majority of their neighbors have accepted and befriended their family. They said a small group of only six people, including the Burkharts, continue to protest the dairy.

"I think people need to realize that most farmers are real good environmental stewards," JosŽ said.

The Van Wezels have been under scrutiny by the Ohio EPA. On July 12 and July 13, they injected roughly 360,000 gallons of liquid manure into a 36-acre field. An estimated 3,000 gallons of manure spilled into a ditch, which runs into a nearby tributary.

The spill affected a three-quarter-mile length of the ditch, according to the Ohio EPA. Jeroen Van Wezel called the EPA on Sunday, July 14 at about 8 a.m., a half-hour after he discovered the spill. The Van Wezels said the spill was due primarily to dry weather. Cracks in the soil developed, allowing manure to filter into the crevices and then the ditch.

"We are sorry the spill happened, but we did exactly what we were supposed to to clean it up," Jeroen said. "This is my home now, too. Why would we not want to keep it clean?"

From importer to exporter

While Dutch dairies are locating and expanding in America, some farm experts believe the United States will eventually become an exporter of farmers as land, labor, buildings and equipment become more expensive and regulations become more strict.

"Large animal production will move out of the country," said David Zartman, an animal sciences professor at Ohio State University. And with it, he predicted, will go the U.S. grain and feed industries.

Phil Warnken, founder of a Missouri-based business that promotes agricultural investments in Brazil, said opportunities there are nearly limitless.

"In the case of Brazil, it does not have the environmental controls that the U.S. has," said Warnken, president and CEO of AgBrazil. "Many producers look at that. Brazil does not have anything in place that's going to slow down livestock production as far as environmental controls. Right now, almost anything goes — within reason."

Once Brazil has slaughter houses and other infrastructure in place, livestock and poultry producers will move in quickly, Warnken predicted. A broiler slaughterhouse recently opened in the Brazilian state of Bahia, where Warnken relocates clients. Warnken said Brazil provides cheap corn and soybeans, and labor costs are much lower than in the United States.

"We are going to be contacting some of the Dutch dairy producers because the opportunities there for milk production are just outstanding," he said. "There's just simply no question that that's where livestock's going to go."

Zartman said some of his colleagues argue that American consumers would never give up their food security, but he's not convinced.

"We'll import more of our food as long as they (consumers) think somebody inspected it," he said.

"As long as it's cheap."

[From the Dayton Daily News: 12.06.2002]

Basic steps can have impact on megafarms

A Dayton Daily News Editorial

"Do what you can with what you have, where you are," is President Theodore Roosevelt's famous prescription for practical action. It may best describe how the public can have the greatest impact on the megafarm movement.

These immense, highly concentrated livestock operations quietly came upon us, and now they're irretrievably entrenched in Ohio and across the nation. Every prospect points toward their continued growth — along with environmental problems of increasing complexity.

Later this month, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will announce rules that specifically apply to concentrated animal-feeding operations. They're intended as a national strategy of minimum standards. And, in that, they do represent some progress — though mainly because public officials in so many places have been so inattentive, if not oblivious, to the threats posed by megafarms.

The rules will not, however, relieve Ohio from the broad environmental risks megafarms pose. That will require sustained local action. And the public must be strategic in its efforts to restore balance, because megafarms represent so potent an economic force in a state not known for its regulatory vigor.

Ohio can be carried a long way by pursuing several basic steps, all revolving around a change in public outlook.

Public officials must be made to view megafarms for what they are: big business. Farmers have earned an immutable place in Ohio's history. They still contribute significantly to the state's social fabric. But boosterism by the state Department of Agriculture and Gov. Bob Taft — exemplified by the "hug a farmer" campaign — must be tempered with realism.

Factory farms, no less than industrial manufacturers, produce toxic wastes in large amounts. They should be treated no differently.

That means basic accountability, in which megafarms are made to keep track of what they release into the environment. Before and after they apply manure to the land, they should monitor and test local waterways, upstream and down. And publish the results. The same should be done after major rainfall.

That also means respecting the views of local communities. Before shopping centers or industrial facilities are allowed to locate in any particular place, the local public's voice is heard. The same should hold for concentrated livestock operations, which affect property values and quality of life in the very same ways. Open, public process should precede their setting up shop or expanding existing operations.

Finally, megafarm operations that most directly risk public health and neighboring property owners should be strictly curtailed.

Ohio regulations, for example, allow manure to be placed within 50 feet of drinking-water intakes. That's not enough. The state also imposes too modest requirements on how far from neighboring properties and public amenities a nuisance such as manure lagoons must be set back.

Agribusiness can be made to respect the public interest. But only if the public demands it, starting first with fundamentals.

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Dutch family sees Ohio as land of opportunity Van Erk's plan to escape restrictions of homeland

By Don Melvin
Dayton Daily News

ZEEWOLDE, Netherlands | Jaap van Erk and his wife, Alma, have a book that shows where their future lies. Sometimes they take it out and look at it when they are thinking about the days to come.

The book is an atlas. And their future lies in Ohio.

In February, if all goes according to plan, van Erk, 33, and his 30-year-old wife, will pack up their two young sons and move to the farm they bought near Defiance in Paulding County. There, they hope to enjoy advantages unavailable to dairy farmers in crowded, industrial Europe — the chance to expand, freedom from burdensome regulations, and the respect accorded those who do important work.

The van Erks are by no means alone in their American dream. Scores of dairy farmers in the Netherlands and Germany, frustrated by constraints on growth, are considering moving. In some cases they may leave behind land their family has farmed for hundreds of years.

During the last four years, Vreba-Hoff Dairy Development, a company that helps farmers relocate from Europe to the United States, has moved more than 30 farmers, the vast majority of them from the Netherlands, to Indiana, Michigan and Ohio. All have established new operations with more than 600 cows.

Most of them seek, above all, opportunity.

"To grow on the farm, it's not possible here," van Erk said.

But it is possible in the American Midwest, where land is cheaper and more plentiful, barns are less expensive to build and there are no milk quotas to purchase.

So van Erk has sold the farm his father established 18 years ago on land newly reclaimed from the sea, where he had 260 cows, 125 of them giving milk. In Paulding, he will start a farm with 699 cows — one under the number that would require him to get a state permit.

"The family says, 'No, don't do it. We will miss you,' " he said. "But it's our future." Farming seems to hold little promise in this part of Europe.

"The biggest problem for the future in the Netherlands is being in a country where you have 80 percent too much of the product that you make," said Alex van Bakel, one of the partners in Vreba-Hoff.

That surplus means farmers are required to buy milk quotas in order to produce. It's a one-time expense, but a hefty one for a farmer striving to expand, amounting to as much as \$15,000 per cow.

Van Erk puts the cost of expansion — buying the milk quota, building barn space and acquiring land — at \$35,000 per cow. Others estimate it at closer to \$45,000.

For van Erk to expand by 500 cows or so, as he will do when he moves to Ohio, would cost anywhere from \$17 million to \$22 million if he stayed in the Netherlands.

The cost in Ohio is estimated at \$6,500 per cow — less than a fifth as much.

European dairy farmers also complain about what they see as excessive regulation. They are required to keep very detailed records, and the paperwork confines them to the office two days a week on farms that, almost uniformly, are operated single-handedly.

Mistakes in the record keeping can, at least in theory, cost them the right to deliver their milk to the factory — the ultimate penalty for a dairy farmer.

And they fear that the European Union will add more bureaucracy on top of that imposed by their national governments.

Their objection to excessive regulations, farmers in Europe said, does not mean that they object to protecting the environment. On the contrary, they contend that they have a long history of respect for the land. Their cows need clean water to produce quality milk; to pollute the water, they said, would be to cut their own throats.

Many of them are aware of Anton Pohlmann, the German farmer whose Buckeye Egg Farm has run afoul of Ohio's environmental laws. Given the experience with Buckeye Egg, they said, Midwesterners are understandably concerned about European farmers relocating to the United States.

"I could understand this fear," said Jan-Hinnerk Morisse, a 25-year-old German dairy farmer who is considering relocating to the States. "I saw the pictures from the Pohlmann farm. But that's not my sense of how to do farming."

"Pohlmann was a criminal," Morisse's father, Martin, cut in. "He was a bad man." Vreba-Hoff officials, too, are aware that some Ohioans are convinced that megafarms in general despoil the environment.

"So we've got to prove them wrong," said Andries Haveman, who works for Vreba-Hoff. "We know we're being watched."

The company said it tries to relocate only "environmentally conscious dairy producers." Van Erk runs a government-certified "biological" farm, meaning he uses no chemicals. A windmill near his barn provides his electricity. But he, too, understands that his new neighbors could be worried.

He said that's one reason he plans to start his operation under the 700-cow limit that would require a state permit. Applying for a state permit while still living overseas would be difficult, Vreba-Hoff officials said. And neighbors, fearing the unknown, would be more likely to raise objections to a large farm run by someone they had never met.

Van Erk plans to hold open houses, once he is established, so that his neighbors can see how he runs his farm and ease their fears. "They can come see you don't let your manure into the ditch," he said.

He plans to expand and to obtain the necessary permit when he passes the 700-cow trigger. Vreba-Hoff officials said the farms they build all start with manure management plans that will meet state requirements once expansion makes a permit necessary.

Van Erk believes that people in Paulding County will come to see him as a contributing member of the community. As with almost all farmers moved to the states by Vreba-Hoff, he has signed a

five-year agreement with a local crop farmer, to their mutual benefit. The crop farmer will get the manure from van Erk's dairy farm to fertilize his fields. Van Erk will have more fields on which to spread his manure. And the majority of the feed for his cows will come from the local farmer in the form of alfalfa, corn and other crops.

Farmers in Europe said that other people in their homeland look down on them, seeing them only as producers of manure who inconveniently drive tractors down the roads. Farmers are not held in high esteem.

"When you are going out, you don't say, 'I am a farmer,' " Alma van Erk said. But a visit to the Paulding County Fair in July convinced her and her husband that the same is not the case in America. "The people we were speaking to said, 'It's quite an impressive job,' " van Erk recalled.

The van Erks look forward to growth, greater prosperity and the chance to hire some help, spend a little more time with their sons, and even get away from the farm for a vacation now and then. Still, they did not take lightly the decision to move.

Van Erk also scouted areas in Germany and Denmark. Even after deciding that the United States offered the best opportunity, he said he would not move if his wife objected.

But the Ohio landscape reminded her of the Netherlands. She checked the schools and the community and thought that this was the place she wanted to live.

Besides, she said, she saw her husband's face as he drove through Ohio looking at all the big farm buildings, the likes of which are rarely seen in the Netherlands.

"His eyes were glowing," she said. "And I thought: We are going."

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