

LB

MAISSING



HARROWSMITH COUNTRY LIFE

A STINK

Sometimes, rural life smells. Just ask the folks who live downwind.

BY DEBBY GREGORASH

AS A SEASONED FARMER WHO ONCE RAN A 50-SOW FARROW-TO-FINISH OPERATION, LEO KURTENBACH KNOWS THAT ONE OF THE DRAWBACKS TO RAISING LIVESTOCK IS THAT SOMETIMES THE AIR IS...WELL, FRAGRANT, RIPE WITH THE DISAGREEABLE SMELL OF MANURE. But even that hasn't prepared him for the odours that plague him today. Just three-quarters of a mile away from his acreage near Cudworth, Saskatchewan, is a new mega-barn, an operation housing about 1,200 sows. When the air is still, the smell of hogs hangs over their home. It never goes away. Even on hot summer days, the couple has to keep their windows closed.

The daily stench confirmed Leo's worst fears. When plans for the barn construction were first announced a few years ago, he urged local politicians to reconsider the facility, and even wrote the shareholders. His pleas were ignored. "The lure of the greenback was too powerful," he laments, wondering aloud if it was assumed that as farmers, the Kurtenbachs would be accustomed to the smell and raise no fuss. Leo disagrees. "No one has the right to pollute your air space and devalue your property." He winces at the recent news that four more hog

barns are due to be constructed in his rural neighbourhood.

Fresh air is taken for granted in the country. In fact, pure air, laced perhaps with the scent of freshly cut hay, is one of the things that makes rural living so desirable and is a key factor in luring city dwellers to country environs. But clean air can no longer be guaranteed. And we can thank today's trend toward industrial agriculture—and the industrial quantities of manure it produces—for that.

Back when Old MacDonald had his farm, the smell wasn't so bad, for he only had a couple of cows and pigs. Indeed manure itself is hardly evil, at least in reasonable amounts. Sure, the odour is offensive, but the stuff makes dandy fertilizer, and does a quick disappearing act in a grazing pasture, thanks to soil microbes and insects. But today's barns are home to hundreds, if not thousands, of head of livestock, and produce more manure than Mother Nature can ever hope to cope with. Hog barns are the worst, because pig manure has a more liquid texture as the indoor pens are rinsed with water. It piles up in lagoons, an elegant word for cesspools, and stinks to high heaven every time it is disturbed. When it comes time to

spread the manure on the fields, malodorous scents carry for miles downwind.

The problem is probably most severe on the Prairies, where mega-barns have been popping up in record numbers since the Mulroneys era. Back then, the traditional farmer's subsidy on grain shipments was cut, which prompted provincial governments to think of ways to use local grain closer to home. And what better way than to feed it to livestock? But the new farms are not Mom-and-Pop operations. They are corporate, run on the principles of profit and economies of scale. In the meantime, neighbours are complaining about more than just the smell. Some of them even wind up in the hospital. Others worry about property values and even fear for their livelihoods.

Jim Scharf of Perdue, Saskatchewan, is a farmer turned entrepreneur who employs up to 20 people to manufacture the E-Zeewrap plastic wrap dispenser. He and other Perdue residents fought and lost a bid to stop a 2,400-sow farrow-to-finish operation three and a half miles from his home. He believes that the odours from such a large factory farm will permeate the corrugated boxes he produces.

STINKING TO HIGH HEAVEN IN ALBERTA

The town of Picture Butte, Alberta, lies in the heart of "Feedlot Alley," a 250-square-mile area north of Lethbridge that is home to far more cattle than people. Half a million head of beef cattle live there, and as the stench from the exploding livestock industry continues to grow, some of the human population is getting restless. A few have moved away, while others flee during the summer simply because they can't stomach the pervasive stink of manure. Anyone in the agriculture biz will smile and tell you it's just the smell of money, but to others the stink is no laughing matter.

Down the road near Monarch, Bev Potter lives about 400 yards from a 7,600 beef feedlot. "We have a nice back yard, but often we can't enjoy it because of the obnoxious smell," she says. "It's worst when it

rains and on hot still evenings when the smell just lingers." Bev wonders about her right to good quality living, knowing that

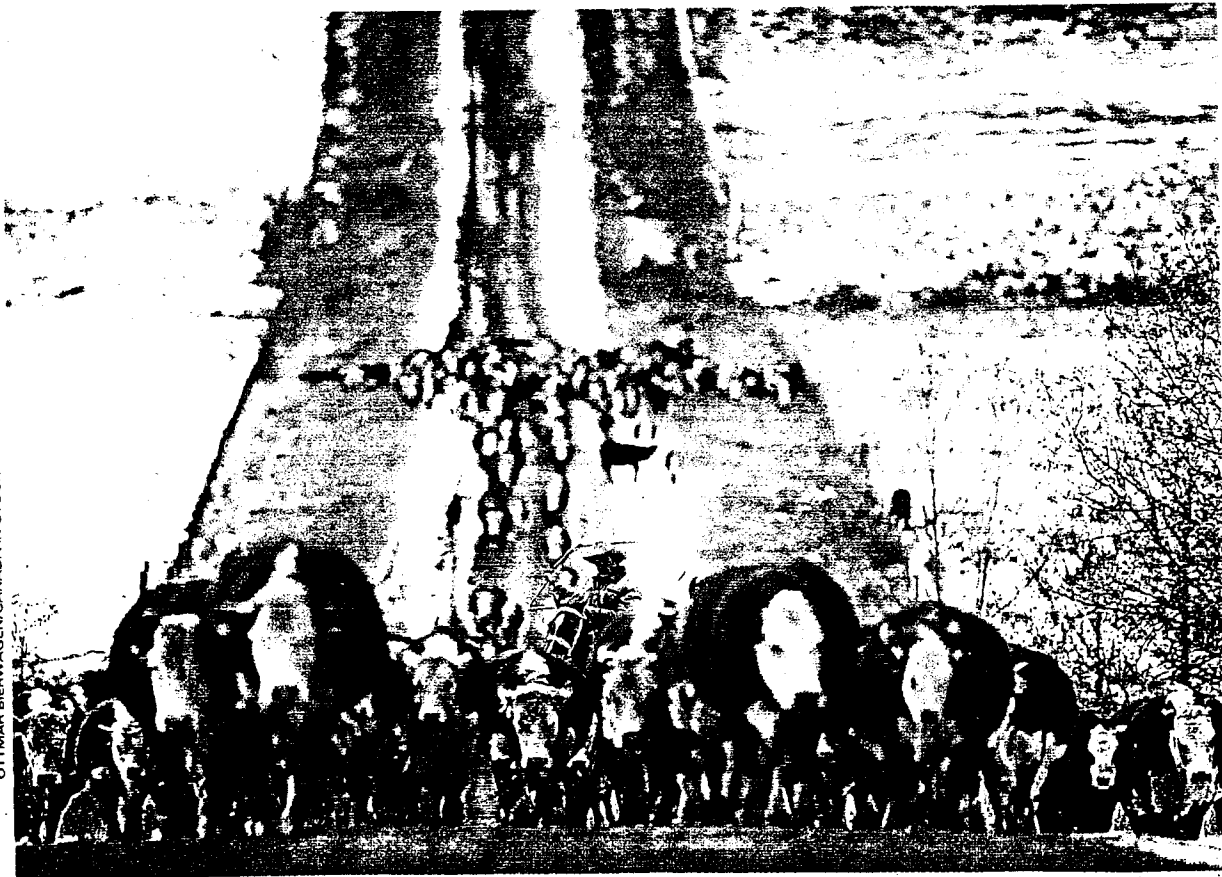
the County of Lethbridge has allowed feedlot owners to expand by 6,000 head in recent years. "We moved here in 1976, long before there was a feedlot. So where do we stand?"

Jim and Avis Rettie live near Turin, at the easterly end of Feedlot Alley. Avis' father homesteaded the farm in 1926. In a recent letter to the editor of a local paper, she addresses her neighbour, who owns a 15,000-head beef feedlot just over a mile from her home. She writes, "Our way of life with emphasis on the important aspects of country living (e.g. fresh air, peace and tranquility) are fast disappearing." The 74-year-old farm woman believes that too many feedlots have been permitted in her area. "We have to shut the windows and can't go outside between 7 and 10 p.m., the worst

hours. The dust and dirt from the trucks combined with the strong smell of manure is unbearable." Her neighbours agree, but what irks them most is the livestock producers' lack of concern or sympathy. "They just don't care about other people's feelings," Avis says. "Those who speak out are often branded as whiners."

Sue Ruaben, a business owner and councillor for Picture Butte, concedes that it is the lack of consideration that bothers her most. She can see some improvements, however. One pig farmer adjacent to town tries not to spread manure on hot summer days or on weekends. He also goes to the trouble of "shanking," or injecting, the manure under the soil so that it doesn't smell. "If all the producers operated like him, things would be very different," comments Sue. But that's little consolation to residents like Avis Rettie and Bev Potter who still have no choice but to hold their noses.

OTTAWA BIERWAGEN/CANADA IN STOCK





COURTESY, JIM

"This hog operation is factory farming at its worst. The lagoons are just starting to fill now and if the stench reaches my business, I'm outta here," says Jim.

Manure gives off carbon dioxide and methane, but the strongest odours arise from hydrogen sulphide and ammonia-derived gases. When a visitor enters a cattle feedlot, chicken pen or pig barn, the sharp, the pungent odour of ammonia stings the nose and makes the eyes water. The sting might subside in a minute or two, but there's really no escape. Farm air is filled with a cocktail mixture of allergens and other ingredients that academics are only now uncovering. A study in Holland reported that dust on a pig farm may contain moulds, bacteria, insect parts, pollen, grain particles, animal dander, mineral ash, animal feed and animal fluid. In fact, over 135 volatile compounds have been found in two studies of barnyard waste emissions. Studies at the University of

Saskatchewan confirmed a definite correlation between long-term exposure to indoor hog-barn air and chronic bronchitis, wheezing and sinus problems. It's much the same story in a 1996 report from the Minnesota Department of Health, which says, "Psychologically, a great variety of responses involving the neuroimmune and neuroendocrine systems may be elicited by odours." The Chinook Health Region of southern Alberta writes that some responses such as nausea, stress responses and allergic responses, are signs and symptoms of illness, and that the stressful stimuli may exacerbate already existing disease conditions. In other words, farm odours can make you sick.

Lloyd Richardson of St. Benedict, Saskatchewan, went into the hog business but was forced to quit when he found it impossible to breathe in the barn. "I'd come out coughing and hacking till I thought I'd be sick," he says. "I was in the hospital three times with a 104 degree temperature." Lloyd had

An Investment
to come home to.



To order your
full colour catalogue



Call us toll free from
anywhere in Canada at:

1-800-717-9709



JOHN CALLAN/IMAGE BANK

developed a dangerous asthmatic response to the dander and the odour of pigs, which developed into pneumonia. So, when he heard about a proposal by the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool to build new hog barns just a mile away from his home, he came out swinging. He won the battle, but not because of any concern for his health. The site was rejected

only because it did not have enough available water and the soil was not suitable for a manure lagoon. Lloyd says the odds are stacked against people like him because agribusiness is so important to the Prairie economy. All levels of government have a vested interest in factory farming and even at the local level, many of the private shareholders are neighbours just trying to earn a living.

The good news for anyone raising a stink about the stink is that some politicians are listening. Earlier this year, the County of Starland in Alberta refused a development permit application to a hog farmer near Drumheller. One of the reasons for the denial was concern for the health of the 11 families who live within two miles of the site. The appeal board "was not satisfied on the balance of the evidence that was presented that the odours that would be produced by the development would be adequately reduced by the use of wind screening materials, manure storage or the use of chemical treatment." Maybe there's hope yet for others.

Such decisions worry working farmers, however. "If I lived next door to 2,000 beef cattle, I'd probably protest too," says Mark Farber, who counts a mere 50 pigs on his farm just a mile or two outside Guelph, Ontario. "But what about someone like me? I'm afraid all this fuss over farm smells may eventually affect my right to farm. After all, farmers were here first and we find it hard to feel sorry for all those ex-city dwellers whose sensitive noses can't abide a little pig poo." He may have a point. As suburbia expands and legions of urbanites head for the country, the protests can't be far behind. Mark looks to the eastern hori-

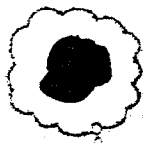
zon, where he can see the lights of the city, and wonders how long it will be before the subdivisions reach his doorstep. "How will the new suburbanites like it when I spread the manure in the spring?"

Surely Mark can learn a few lessons from Peter Bienz, whose dairy farm in Lacolle, Quebec, is within smelling distance of 40 close neighbours. "It's a matter of common sense and decency," he confides. "We try to maintain harmony with our neighbours." Peter makes sure he doesn't spread manure on weekends or when the wind is blowing the wrong way. He also endeavours to plough it under within a couple of days. "Not only is this a good neighbour policy, it's also better for the soil, as manure loses many of its nutrients if it lies on the surface too long."

Meanwhile, back in Cudworth, the hog barn that plagues Leo and Helen Kurtenbach presents a larger problem, because there is no legislation to govern the issue. Though the provincial *Agricultural Code of Practice for Responsible Livestock Development and Manure Management* states that manure should be incorporated into the soil within 24 to 48 hours, this is merely a suggestion, not law. Nor is there a policy on planting windbreaks or covering lagoons with straw, although both are effective at controlling odours. Another answer may lie in a mineral called zeolite, which is added to livestock feed to control some of the worst ammonia-based aromas. It's still under study, so in the meantime, the Kurtenbachs will just have to keep their windows closed. *Se*

Debby Gregorash has endured her share of the sweet scents of farm life, working on dairy farms, ranches and yes, a beef feedlot. She studied agriculture at McGill and now lives in Coaldale, Alberta.

(ARE YOU THINKING
WHAT WE'RE
SYSTEM THINKING?)



FOR MORE INFORMATION
ON SYSTEM THINKING, CALL
1-800-GET-PINK
438-7465



visit us at www.owenscorning.com