

The Questions Rural Communities Should Ask About CAFOs¹

John Ikerd²

This paper is a statement of *my truth* concerning the impacts of large-scale confinement animal feeding operations (CAFOs) on rural communities. Over the past ten years, I have met with rural people concerned about CAFOs in more than a dozen states and in three provinces of Canada. To prepare for these meetings, I have reviewed research data from a wide variety of sources and have listened to arguments on both sides of the issue. I have also learned a great deal from listening both to those who are promoting CAFOs and to those who are adamantly opposed to CAFOs, including people currently living downwind and downstream from CAFOs.

My truth is based on everything I have learned from this decade of experience. If your truth is different from mine, that's okay with me. None of us should be so egotistical as to believe that only we know the truth. What's most important is that we each have sound reasons for believing what we believe to be true. And, "because someone else wrote it or said it," is not a sound reason for believing anything. I write and speak my truth with conviction because I know it is based on sound scientific data and on actual experiences of real people in real communities.

The Internet provides convenient access to a wealth of scientific data and real stories of real people relevant to the CAFO issue. The *Grace Factory Farm Project*: <http://factoryfarm.org/>, *Families Against Rural Messes*: <http://www.farmweb.org/>, and the *Sierra Club Factory Farms Project*: <http://www.sierraclub.org/factoryfarms/> provide good places to start a web search. Each of these sites links to dozens of related websites. Books, such as *Pigs, Profits, and Rural Communities*,³ *Raising a Stink*,⁴ and *The Meat We Eat*⁵ also provide valuable insights into various aspects of the CAFO issue. Those who want facts about CAFOs can find facts.

Obviously, each community I have visited is different, but they all have many similarities. For example, the strategies of those promoting CAFOs are essentially the same in all communities. The agribusiness corporations promote CAFOs as a logical rural economic development strategy, as the future of animal agriculture, and the only means of maintaining a viable agriculture sector in rural communities. In reality, however, the corporations are just looking for some place, any place, where they can dispose of mountains of livestock manure, so they can reap large profits for their stockholders. The questions that rural people are asking, and should ask, about the impacts of CAFOs on their community also are nearly always the same. They want to know whether any potential economic benefits of CAFOs are worth the ecological and social costs.

¹ Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeast Iowa Chapter of Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Milton, IA, April 1, 2006.

² John Ikerd is Professor Emeritus, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO – USA; author of, *Sustainable Capitalism: A Matter of Common Sense*, <http://www.kpbooks.com>; E-mail: JEIkerd@aol.com ; web site: <http://www.ssu.missouri.edu/faculty/jikerd>.

³ Kendall Thu and Paul Durenberger, editors, *Pigs, Profits, and Rural Communities* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), 1998.

⁴ Carolyn Johnson, *Raising a Stink: The Struggle over Factory Hog Farms in Nebraska* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press), 2003.

⁵ Ken Midkiff, *The Meat We Eat: How Corporate Farming Has Endangered America's Food Supply* (New York: St. Martin's Press), 2004.

Are CAFOs a logical rural economic development strategy? Different studies have addressed this issue in different ways, with different results. However, the truth, *my truth*, can be found by looking at communities where CAFOs have been embraced, or at least accepted, as a prominent strategy for rural economic development. Community leaders have been promised that CAFOs will add to local employment and the local tax base. They are told that dollars spent locally for buildings, equipment, feed, and feeder livestock will multiply as they ripple through the community, resulting in additional expenditures for groceries, clothes, housing, automobiles, healthcare, and other consumer necessities. Increased property tax collections are purported to pay for better local schools, roads, and other public services. However, the actual economic impacts invariably are quite different from those promised.

The truth is in results, not in promises. After several decades of large-scale contract poultry and beef production and more than a decade of widespread contract CAFO hog production, *not a single community where CAFOs represent a significant segment of the local economy is looked upon today as a model of economic success or prosperity*. Admittedly, corporations tend to locate CAFOs in areas that are economically depressed; they target communities that are desperate for economic development. But CAFOs have consistently failed to bring about significant improvements in unemployment or overall economic well-being of local residents.

First, corporate contractors buy very few of their building materials, equipment, feed, or feeder animals in the local community. It's invariably cheaper to bring them in from other places, and corporations buy from the cheapest source. In addition, many of those who ultimately are employed in confinement operations, feed mills, and slaughter plants turn out to be immigrants to the communities, not local residents. The jobs typically are low-paying jobs with few if any medical benefits. Thus, the additional needs for public services typically outweigh any economic contribution of added employment. In contract feeding operations, for example, the University of Missouri estimates total labor costs for a 600-sow hog operation would support eight full-time employees earning about \$15,000 per year, or about \$7.50 per hour. While this may sound like decent jobs in some rural communities, these kinds of jobs cannot provide the foundation for an economically viable rural community.

Perhaps the most compelling arguments against relying on CAFOs as a source of rural economic development is that communities in which CAFOs become prominent typically are unable to attract any other type of economic development. People simply do not want to live and work in a community that other people consider to be "polluted." By virtually every measure, poverty levels rise, not fall, after a community becomes identified as "CAFO friendly." And once made, a decision to rely on CAFOs for economic development may be very difficult to reverse.

Will CAFOs save the agricultural sector of the local economy? Rural community leaders are told that CAFOs are the animal agriculture of the future. So if they discourage CAFOs from coming into their communities, they will be denying local livestock and poultry farmers their only realistic opportunity to survive. Nearby communities will welcome CAFOs, they are told, and the surrounding communities that discourage CAFOs will still have to deal with environmental and social consequences without receiving any of the economic benefits. Proponents argue that being "unfriendly to CAFOs," is being "unfriendly to farming."

Again, the truth is quite different from the hype. First, today's CAFOs are a continuation of a long-term trend toward the industrialization of agriculture. U.S. farms have been becoming more specialized, more homogeneous, larger in size, and fewer in number since the 1930s. Today, contract production, controlled by multinational corporations, is allowing agricultural operations to grow far larger than was previously possible for individual farmers or even family corporations. Continuing this trend, through corporately controlled CAFOs, will result in even fewer people controlling agriculture and even fewer real farmers. CAFOs may employ a few local *farm workers*, but all of the important decisions, and profits, will be made by people in corporate headquarters, not by farmers. CAFOs will not save farmers or local farm economies.

The hog industry provides strong supporting evidence. Every state in which hog CAFOs have become prominent has experienced a significant decrease in numbers of hog farmers, not an increase. North Carolina, where hog CAFOs first became prominent, experienced a doubling of hog production and a halving of the number of hog farmers in the seven-years between 1986 and 1993. Between 1985 and 2003, the number of hog farmers in the U.S. fell by more than 80%, to less than one-fifth of pre-CAFOs numbers. Industrial operations gain their efficiency by reducing management and labor costs per unit of output. It should come as no surprise that the industrialization of agriculture, which is what CAFOs are all about, results in fewer farmers.

Each person employed in hog CAFOs in one community destroys the opportunities anywhere from one-and-a-half to three real hog farmers elsewhere, depending on the situation. The number of hogs produced nationally has increased very little throughout the transition to CAFO production. Since it takes fewer people to produce a given number of hogs under the contract CAFO system, there is room for fewer real hog farmers in the marketplace. And, it's not simply a matter of survival of the fittest or the lowest cost producers. Contractors have the economic power to buy their way into the market, by offering favorable terms to initial contract producers. Once they have sufficient supplies of animals under contract to influence the market, they begin use their power to squeeze out the independent producers, by manipulating live prices. They don't care how low live hog prices go because they make up any losses in larger profit margins for their processing and marketing activities.

Over the longer term, even the corporate contract operations will be forced to leave rural communities in the U.S. and Canada. Labor and investment costs are far lower in other countries of the world where the giant multinational corporations operate today, and environmental concerns and constraints are far less in those "less-developed" countries. People of many other countries of the world are even more desperate for economic opportunities than are people in rural America. Eventually, the contract CAFO operations will leave North America, leaving rural communities with the mess to be cleaned up.

Are there any logical alternatives to CAFOs? Farmers are told that large-scale confinement animal feeding is an inevitable aspect of the future of agriculture. If they want stay in farming, they are told, they are going to have to become part of the new global agricultural supply chain, by becoming a contract producer for one of the multi-national agribusiness corporations. Even if they would prefer to continue farming as independent producers, there are simply no logical alternatives to large-scale, contract production.

Again, the reality is quite different. A variety of new farming opportunities are emerging in response to growing environmental and social concerns associated with the industrialization of agriculture. For example, the market for organic foods has been growing at a rate of more than 20% per year over the past 15 years, doubling every three to four years. This growing preference for organic is not simply a reflection of consumers trying to avoid pesticide and agrichemical residues in their foods. They are concerned about a wide range of issues, including the impacts of their food choices on farmers, farm workers, and stewardship of land and water resources. Recent surveys indicate that around three-fourths of American consumers have a strong preference for locally grown foods preferably grown on small family farms. They want to know where their food comes, how it is produced, and who produced it. Many Americans have simply lost confidence in the integrity of the corporations and the government agencies with whom the integrity of the food system has been entrusted. Increasingly, they are buying food they can trust by buying it from people they trust.

This new sustainable/local food movement, not CAFOs, is the American farmer's best hope for the future. Among the most profitable of the new sustainable/local alternatives are grass-based, free-range, and pastured livestock and poultry. Pastured and free-range poultry production became popular because of growing concerns about health and food safety and about inhumane growing conditions in industrial poultry production. Grass-based livestock operations initially gained popularity because of low investment requirements and low cost of production. However, it has become increasingly popular because of growing evidence of important health benefits in grass-fed products compared with products from animals fed in confinement. Pastured and free-range livestock production also allows producers to avoid hormones and antibiotic concerns and to meet the humane standards of production demanded by an increasing number of consumers. Producing hogs on deep bedding in hoop houses provides another viable alternative to the slatted floors, cramped crates, and manure lagoons of CAFOs. Studies at Iowa State University have shown that hogs can be produced in hoop houses just as efficiently as in CAFOs; they just require better management and more hog farmers. Why not support more better hog farmers?
<http://www.agmrc.org/agmrc/commodity/livestock/pork/productionresearcheconomicsprofit.htm>

The markets for sustainable/local meats and milk are growing far faster than are the numbers of farmers willing to produce for these new markets. The number of farmers markets – where meat, cheese, and eggs are taking their place along side local produce – has more than doubled in the past ten years. Many food buying clubs now offer their subscribers animal products along with vegetables and berries. Sustainable livestock and poultry producers also have opportunities to market through national organizations such as Organic Valley (<http://organicvalley.coop/>) and Niman Ranch (<http://www.nimanranch.com/>) or to form their own cooperative organizations, such as Country Natural Beef of Oregon (<http://www.oregoncountrybeef.com/index.html>) and Good Natured Family Farms of Kansas (<http://www.goodnatured.net/>). There are a growing number of profitable and sustainable alternatives for farmers. CAFOs represent the agriculture of the past, not the agriculture of the future.

Doesn't the nation need CAFOs to ensure affordable prices? The proponents argue that CAFOs are needed to provide the large quantities of meat, milk, and eggs needed to keep prices affordable in the supermarkets. They claim alternative niche markets will work for only a few

farmers and a few affluent consumers, but only large-scale, confinement production can meet the needs of mainstream American consumers and a growing global market for animal products.

Again, the evidence indicates otherwise. The increases in per capita supplies and declines in prices experienced as poultry operations moved to contract confinement feeding has not been realized for beef and pork. Increasing consumption of beef in the 1970s was largely a function of increases in demand for hamburger beef – McDonalds, Burger King, and Wendy’s – rather than increased demand for the grain-fed beef coming out of large feedlots. And beef prices didn’t fall, but rose, throughout this period of strong demand. Per capita pork consumption has been virtually flat for the past fifty years, in spite of the transformation of production from family hog farms to large contract CAFOs during the 1990s. Prices of pork and beef declined somewhat in the 1980’s and 1990’s (after adjusting for inflation) but this was a period of weak consumer demand, arising from health concerns linked to red meat consumption. With the recent resurgence in red meat demand, linked to the highly popular Atkins diet, deflated prices of beef and pork have started to climb. The facts: CAFOs have not reduced prices for red meats.

Deflated prices for live hogs and live cattle at the farm level have declined over the past several decades, but these declines have not been reflected in lower retail meat prices. Part of the decline in live prices reflects the lack of competitiveness in the few remaining public markets for livestock, as the vast majority of total livestock supplies are now procured through private corporate contracts. Many mid-sized independent livestock producers still achieve cost of production as low or lower than costs in CAFOs, but prices received by independent producers are depressed by their lack of access to competitive markets. Any potential savings in the transition to CAFOs have been lost due to larger spreads between live animal prices and retail meat prices, with both consumers and producers making larger contributions to corporate profits.

Why have some rural communities accepted CAFOs? The proponents ask why CAFOs have become so prominent, if they do nothing for rural economic development, if local farmers have better alternatives, and if they are not needed to produce meat, milk, and eggs at reasonable prices. My answer, *my truth*, is that the people of rural areas, including farmers, are being misled by the agricultural establishment, which includes the large agricultural colleges, federal and state departments of agriculture, corporate agribusinesses, large agri-cooperatives, major commodity associations, and some general farm organizations, such as the Farm Bureau Federation.

These institutions and organizations have been promoting industrialization for decades as a means of making agriculture more economically efficient. They have forgotten that the initial reason for efficiency was to benefit farmers, consumers, rural residents, and society in general. They have simply ignored growing evidence that rising social and ecological costs now outweigh any potential economic benefits from further industrialization. They have built their organizations and professional reputations promoting factory farming and are unwilling to risk the loss of prestige, power, or profits by admitting that agricultural industrialization no longer benefits anyone other themselves and a few large corporate investors.

A quick examination of the types of rural economic development opportunities being touted by the so-called development experts reveals some valuable insights into the general assessment of the current economic value of rural areas. Many rural communities, desperate for jobs, are

encouraged to compete for prisons. If they can't get a prison, they can settle for a landfill, so they can bury trash from some distant urban center. If they can't get a landfill deal, they can probably get a toxic waste incinerator. And if all else fails, they can always roll out the welcome mat for confinement animal feeding operations. The corporate world sees rural areas as empty spaces where they can dump their wastes, so they can continue to profit from their environmentally and socially degrading business activities. The profits remain with investors in the urban area, while rural people are paid a few dollars to dispose of their human, material, and animal wastes.

This is not a rural vs. urban conflict. Urban people are simply trying to protect their environment, and they have more economic and political power than do rural people. The corporations are simply dumping their garbage and their animal manure in those places where people are most desperate for employment and economic opportunity, and where governments are least willing to accept their responsibility to protect people from exploitation.

As rural areas become polluted and degraded by exploitation, the more precious rural resource, the next generation, is leaving for the cities, where they have better opportunities. In fact, rural parents routinely advise their children to go away to college and get a good education so they won't have to return to the rural community or the farm to live. Increasingly, even rural people realize there is no future in turning their communities into dumping grounds for the rest of society. They just don't know what else to do. But, the agricultural establishment and others in respected positions of influence and authority keep telling them that they have no other choice.

Since CAFOs are profitable, aren't they inevitable? The proponents argue that CAFOs obviously are profitable for someone, and if something is profitable then someone is going to do it, regardless of what other people may think. CAFOs are inevitable, they say; we simply cannot do anything to stop them. The element of truth in this argument is that if something is profitable then someone will *want* to do it. However, *wanting* to something is different from being *allowed* to do something. Contrary to popular belief, society does not have to allow something just because someone thinks it would be profitable. For example, robbery obviously is considered profitable by robbers; that's why they do it. But society does not *allow* people to rob and we put those who insist on robbing in prison. A civilized society doesn't allow things that are detrimental to the common good, even if those things might be profitable for individuals.

It is yet to be determined, at least in a court of law, that CAFOs are *inherently* detrimental to the common good. Thus, individual states and communities cannot outlaw CAFOs in their areas of jurisdiction. However, the U.S. Courts have determined that CAFOs represent a potential risk to public health and have upheld the rights of counties to regulate the location and operation of CAFOs, through local health ordinances. The Court opinion states that counties have "the power to make additional health ordinances to enhance the public health and to prevent the entrance of dangerous diseases into the county."⁶ The issue of whether CAFOs present potential health risks to rural residents has been resolved; they do. The right of rural residents to protect themselves

⁶ The "slip opinion" stated on this website has been confirmed, and several Missouri counties have since passed health ordinances similar to Linn County's without further court challenges. However, proponents of CAFOs have made persistent attempts to pass state legislation that would prevent counties from passing such health ordinances. <http://www.courts.mo.gov/courts/pubopinions.nsf/ccd96539c3fb13ce8625661f004bc7da/77622665a691a1ad862568310070e743?OpenDocument&Highlight=0,borron%20>.

from these risks arise from our fundamental, common sense rights to self-defense and self-determination. State and local governments have a responsibility to protect the health and well-being of their citizens. When states fail to act, local governments or health agencies must.

Current interstate commerce laws have caused many people to believe that economic interests must always take priority over all other interests. Admittedly, anything that interferes with interstate commerce, such as restricting specific types of business activities that are not restricted in other states, generally has been ruled to be unconstitutional. However, the “commerce clause” of the U.S. Constitution simply gives the United States Congress the power “To regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes.” (Article I, Section 8, Clause 3). State and local governments cannot enact laws that give priority to people over commerce, only because the right to do so is reserved for the U.S. Congress. However, the Supreme Court has ruled that such state and local laws can be made valid if they are approved by the U.S. Congress. The U.S. Congress also appears to have the authority to allow state and local governments to give priority to public interests over economic interests, if they choose to use their constitutional authority to do so. Perhaps it’s time to call on the U.S. Congress to give priority to the interests of people over profits, not just in the case of CAFOs, but in all similar cases.

Why are CAFOs so disruptive to rural communities? Proponents and opponents of CAFOs agree on at least one thing: CAFOs create major disruptions to the community life of rural people. In one community, I was told that everyone in the county was identified as being either for or against CAFOs. No conversation was said to take place on the county square that did not include a discussion of CAFOs. Communities that were once effective in their community and economic development efforts have been paralyzed by this internal dissension. It’s becomes difficult, if not impossible, to gain public support for schools, health care, roads, and other public services because anything proposed by those on one side of the CAFOs issue is opposed by those on the other. The people of every “CAFO community” I have visited have validated this fact: CAFOs destroy the social fabric of rural communities.

I have never experienced any other issue that is so divisive in more than 35 years of working with farmers and others in rural communities. I eventually concluded, *my truth*, the CAFO controversy violates an important rural ethic. Rural people accept the fact that some members of their communities succeed, while others do not. So, the resentment is not of people wanting to make money. People may be a bit jealous, but if their lives are not made worse by someone else’s success, they accept it. However, the CAFO issue is different. The people who live downwind or downstream from a CAFO know first-hand that their health and overall quality of life is being threatened by their neighbor’s desire to make money. People know that property located near CAFOs has been devalued, even if no one currently lives there. They understand that economic opportunities for their community are limited because they live in a “CAFO friendly” community. When CAFOs threaten a new community, local people oppose them because they fear the same fate. Apparently, it is a violation of an important rural ethic for one person to benefit at the expense of his or her neighbors. Rural people take such violations very seriously.

Why is the agricultural establishment trying to limit local control? The most recent initiative of the agricultural establishment, and the politicians over which they have influence, is to limit the ability of state and local governments to regulate CAFOs. They have supported national initiatives to limit the ability of states to adopt environmental regulations for CAFOs more stringent than federal regulations. Failing in this, thus far, they have promoted initiatives at the state level to make state regulations no more stringent than federal CAFO regulations, which have been watered down through corporate influence in Washington. In addition, they have supported strong state “right to farm” laws, which prevents local governments from passing any regulations restricting farming practices. And more recently, they are using their influence with state legislators in attempts to severely limit the ability of counties to pass health ordinances affecting CAFOs.

The agricultural establishment historically has opposed centralization of authority and has been a strong advocate of state and local control. So why are they now opposing local control? First, they have much more political power at federal and state levels of government than they have at county or local community levels. The agricultural establishment virtually dictates all policy administered by USDA and essentially has virtual veto power over state legislation related to agriculture through their influence of state agricultural legislative committees. Second, rural people at the grass roots level are becoming much better informed on the negative health and environmental consequences of CAFOs, and thus, more local people are becoming more concerned. Today, a massive amount of relevant information is readily available to anyone with a computer and a phone line. Finally, rural people are learning how to organize quickly and to mount effective opposition to CAFOs, or to any other threat to their health or environmental well-being. People who have fought CAFOs in one community willingly share their experiences and strategies with those currently fighting the battle in other communities.

If any good is to come out of the current CAFO controversies, it may well be that the future leadership of rural America is being developed among those who become politically empowered through their experiences in opposing CAFOs. Once people proclaim their basic democratic rights of self-defense and self-determination, they become less intimidated by economic and political power. Local control is a cornerstone of democracy.

Do local ordinances restricting CAFOs violate private property rights? Proponents often claim an inherent right to build and operate CAFOs as a basic right of private property. They claim they have a right to use their land in any way they see fit. Local governments that restrict the conditions under which they are allowed to construct or operate CAFOs are accused of “takings,” meaning the taking away the value of private property without compensation. However, something cannot be *taken* away if it never existed in the first place.

The right to private property has never included the right to use property in a way that devalues the properties of one’s neighbors or diminishes the overall quality of life in the community. CAFOs clearly have the capability of doing both. All land was initially in the commons; there was no private property. Initially, a person could only take land out of the commons if there was as much and as good land left for anyone else who might want to use it. One person’s opportunity to claim private property could not diminish the opportunities of others to do likewise. This same principle has guided private property laws from the very beginning.

Zoning laws are clearly constitutional, and all zoning laws restrict the use of private property. I own three acres in a residential subdivision outside of Columbia, MO. I can't subdivide my lot into three one-acre lots, can't start a business on my property, and can't let my sewage run into the creek behind my property, no matter how profitable it might be for me to do so. Restrictive zoning and covenants restrict my land use, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Those same zoning and covenants prevent my neighbors from doing anything that diminishes my property value or my quality of life. Such laws are not only constitutional they are also both reasonable and necessary in a civilized society where people live in close proximity. Farmers could use their land any way they choose when they lived on a sparsely populated frontier because there was no one else around to be adversely affected. Farmers still have the same property rights but they no longer live on the frontier.

Those who claim an absolute "right to farm" are misinterpreting their rights in much the same was as those who claim absolute private property rights. The "right to farm" logically refers to farming as it existed at the time such rights were granted, with allowances for reasonable changes in farming methods and practices over time. The "right to farm" was never intended to include the "right to operate an animal factory." A CAFO is not a farm; it is a factory.

Admittedly, all farms *smell* but CAFOs *stink*, the difference being the stink of a large CAFO not only creates a nuisance for miles around, but also presents significant risks to human health. All farms have wastes that can pollute streams, but many large CAFOs generate more biological waste than do small cities. Rights to farm were never intended to include factory farms.

In addition, the right to farm was meant to apply to *farmers*. Those who do the work in contract confinement operations are not farmers; they would be more accurately referred to as building superintendents. They make sure the automatic feeding and watering systems are working, keep the ventilation fans running, call the corporate veterinarian when animals get sick, and dispose of the animals that inevitably die. Corporations design the buildings, own the animals, provide the feed, decide when to deliver and market the animals, and in general, make all of the important decisions. These corporations obviously are not farmers. Actually, most so-called contract producers are simply investors; they own the buildings but hire someone at minimum wage to work in the buildings. Most contract producers are little more than local front men for the corporations who make it easier for outside investors to be granted the "right to pollute." They have no inherent "right to farm."

Are health and environmental restrictions on CAFOs undemocratic? I have been called a communist and accused of being undemocratic because I have openly supported government restrictions of CAFOs. The feeling seems to be that it's undemocratic for anyone to support any law or regulation that might limit anyone's ability to maximize profits, regardless of the reason for doing so. However, nothing is less democratic, *my truth*, than denying anyone a voice in shaping public policies, regardless of the economic consequences of such policies. One of the fundamental principles of the democratic belief system is that everyone has an equal right to participate in making the rules by which all in that society are to abide. One of the most fundamental responsibilities of citizenship is to work collectively, through government, for protection of the common good, including the public health and environmental well-being. Individuals who claim the right to participate in the public processes of making rules that protect

the public health, environment, and quality of life are exercising their basic democratic rights and responsibilities.

Many rural communities today are being asked to sacrifice the future so a few local investors and outside corporate investors can benefit economically from large-scale, confinement animal feeding operations. The most valuable assets many of these rural communities possess are their natural environment and their strong sense of community. Rural communities are still viewed by many people as good places to live and raise families. Most are still places with clean air, clean water, open spaces, scenic landscapes, and opportunities for peace, quiet, and privacy. Most are still places where people have a sense of belonging, friendly places where people know and care about each other, where crime rates are low and a strong sense of safety and security still exists. Such attributes are becoming increasingly scarce in America, and thus, are becoming increasingly valuable. It would take a six-figure salary for a city dweller to buy the quality of life that comes with living in a healthy rural community. And some aspects of rural life are truly “priceless.” These precious quality of life attributes represent the future of rural areas, and they are all lost when a community becomes known as “CAFO friendly.”

Rural communities are being systematically abused by a corporatist economy. Our rural areas are being turned into dumping grounds. The abuse is not the fault of urban people, who naturally want to protect their already-polluted natural environment. Current environmental and health regulations are simply inadequate to protect rural areas, as attested to by the repeated and persistently negative health and environmental impacts suffered by rural residents where CAFOs currently operate under those regulations. Rural people must be empowered to stand up for their democratic rights of self-defense and self-determination, to decide for themselves, locally, what needs to be done to protect their health and environment.

Once rural people have reclaimed their right to a healthy and clean environment, they can begin the task of rebuilding an economic, social, and ecological foundation needed for sustainable community development. The future of rural America is in the land and the imagination, creativity, and work ethic of the people of rural communities, not in the cunning and conniving of outside corporate investors. Now is the time to start reinvesting in a new approach to agriculture and a new approach to rural community development, not a time to exploit both land and people for the sake of short run profits. The future of rural communities can be bright, for those who have the wisdom and the courage to claim it.