

[← Back \(/search?](#)

text=Fight%20against%20%27manure%20madness%27%20in%20central%20Michigan%20escalates&content_added=&date_from=&date_to=&pub%5B0%5D=MLCP)

Fight against 'manure madness' in central Michigan escalates

November 19, 2003 Publication: Lansing City Pulse (MI) Word Count: 1408

Fight against 'manure madness' in central Michigan escalates

By DANIEL STURM

There's a big yellow smiley face painted on the barn of Lynn Henning's farm, just outside of Clayton, Mich., about 60 miles south of Lansing. The smile lets visitors know that the 45-year-old crop farmer hasn't given in yet. It was three year ago that Henning began a battle against the factory farms that had begun arriving in Lenawee and Hillsdale counties in the early 1990s. She and a group of other concerned citizens documented the unbearable stench and monitored the water pollution that stemmed from the 10 facilities, which had transformed both their communities and the region.

The area's largest dairy farm operation, the Dutch-American company Vreba-Hoff Dairy, LLC, is being sued by the Granholm administration for polluting Michigan waters.

The 6,000 dairy cows from two south-central Michigan Vreba-Hoff operations generate 120,000 gallons of manure each day. In September the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality issued a civil lawsuit against Vreba-Hoff Dairy in the 30th Judicial Circuit in Ingham County for the unlawful discharge of agricultural wastes from two facilities, into state-owned waters.

The Environmental Concerned Citizens of South Central Michigan, a group of 20 small-scale farmers and area residents who felt threatened by water and air pollution stemming from area factory farms have documented 50 cases of illegal discharges and reported them to MDEQ.

"While Michigan rightly prides itself on a rich agricultural heritage, operations such as these that flout the law and pose an environmental threat to the waters of this state give all of agriculture a black-eye," wrote DEQ's new director, Steven E. Chester, in a press release. "The citizens of this state should not be subjected to the pollution generated by factory farms, and the DEQ will do what's necessary to pursue these violators."

DEQ will prohibit any expansion of the operation until problems are resolved. It's also demanding that Vreba-Hoff construct a wastewater treatment system, apply for a groundwater permit, and notify the state department of any additional discharges. A fine up to \$25,000 will be imposed for each violation, and for each day of continued violation.

Vreba-Hoff is one of 10 "confined animal feeding operations" (CAFOs) in the area, many of which confine thousands of cows, year-round. These industrial farms use huge quantities of water to pump cow feces into holding

pits, some that are as large as lakes. Eventually the liquid manure is sprayed onto fields.

Anne Woiwode, the director of the Sierra Club's Mackinac Chapter, said she's pleasantly surprised about how far DEQ took this case. "This lawsuit is precedent-setting," she said. During the winter 2002-'03, just as Granholm's administration was settling in, the Hudson area's 10 dairy operations were discharging record levels of animal waste, Woiwode said.

The Sierra Club director called CAFO pollution in Hudson one of the worst ecological disasters caused by factory farms in the country. "These farms had too many facilities, too many animals, too little land, and improper handling of the waste. And when there was a combination of very cold winter weather and a sudden melt, this left waste all over the place, and people were literary horrified."

Vreba-Hoff spokeswoman Cecilia Conway admits that there have been six incidences of "unplanned" manure discharges in the past, but says they have gone to great length to prevent such discharges from happening again.

In addition to their own two operations in Hudson, the Dutch-American CAFO has helped seven other agricultural factories set up dairy operations in Michigan, including farms from Canada and the Netherlands.

Woiwode said that European and Canadian farmers were attracted by the lax environmental regulations and the cheap land in the United States.

Factory farms began migrating into Hillsdale and Lenawee counties in the late 1990s. Three years ago, when Vreba-Hoff Dairy built its second operation, and environmentalists and area residents who felt their quality of life was being endangered formed the Environmental Concerned Citizens of South Central Michigan.

In 2001 the Sierra Club gave the group a \$7,000 grant to pay for monitoring expenses and assist with further training.

The team has a Web site, at nocafos.org, where they post their findings. After one dumping, the environmental volunteers measured the number of Escherichia coli bacteria in a county drain at 1.34 million colonies per 100 milliliters—more than 1,000 times the Michigan water standard for partial body contact.

Besides health concerns regarding water pollution, concerns also arise from exposure to ammonia, methane gas, and hydrogen sulfide, emitted from the dairy operations. Hydrogen sulfide, a gas which in low concentrations smells like rotten eggs, and can cause not only flu-like symptoms, but can also trigger anger attacks, and neuro-behavioral dysfunctions.

Henning, a co-founding group member and crop farmer, and her husband, Dean, own 150 acres of farmland, which is literally surrounded by CAFOs. Vreba-Hoff's first factory farm is five miles away from their property, and the American-owned 700-cow operation, Hartland Farms, is just one mile away. Lynn Henning frequently suffers from dizziness and burning eyes, and tends to have soar throats. She is also bothered by the presence of swarms of flies on her property, which appeared together with these operations.

Henning's father-in-law, whose farmhouse is less than 100 feet from Hartland Farms, suffers from hydrogen sulfide poisoning. The 82-year-old farmer, Gerald Henning, and his wife, Cecilia, were diagnosed last April by Kaye Kilburn, a professor of medicine at the University of Southern California who is an expert on this type of poisoning.

Kilburn reported, "Both Henning's show losses of functions that are characteristic of brains damaged by hydrogen sulfide. They are like workers exposed in oil or natural gas fields."

For more than two years, Gerald Henning had called the state Department of Agriculture hotline to complain about manure pollution near his farm, a terrible smell, and a problem with flies. In an ironic twist, his complaint finally drew public attention not because of the abnormal level of pollution or the couple's many health problems but because Ingham County Prosecutor Stuart Dunnings evoked Michigan's 19th century obscenity law and sued the elderly farmer for cursing in a telephone conversation with a public official.

Even though Lynn Henning's group reported 26 illegal discharges of manure to the Department of Environmental Quality between 2000 and 2002, under Gov. John Engler the department did not press any charges.

Michigan has no mandatory permit system, no inspection of lagoons, and no requirements for manure management. Everything is voluntary. The CAFOs did not even need building permits.

The Sierra Club increased its pressure on the Engler administration by filing a petition with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, asking Michigan's authority to run the clean water program be taken away. In 2001, Woiwode says, Michigan finally agreed to implement federal water-discharge permit requirements—but only for CAFOs that operate more than 714 dairy cows, and have already been found in violation of the Clean Water Act.

Woiwode hopes the lawsuit against Vreba-Hoff will lead to long-term policy changes. The Sierra Club has asked the new administration to require smaller farms for a water permit and to regulate farms without water violations. "We think all of these facilities should be permitted in advance, before they ever have an animal occupy one of their buildings," Woiwode said. Agricultural operations should be required to protect human health, just like any other industry. "If you have a factory that is polluting, you can shut it down. This should also apply to CAFOs."

For Henning the battle against factory farms is not over. Although it has already frosted several times this fall, her problem with flies continues. In fact, the month of November appears to be one of the most dangerous for water quality near factory farms, according to ECCSCM, and this is what attracts the insects. After crops have been harvested, there's little vegetation on field surfaces, and when liquid manure is applied in large quantities, it often reaches the underground drainage tiles, which flow into nearby streams.

Reflecting on the state government's lawsuit against Vreba-Hoff, Henning said she thought it was sad to hear that Michigan had to press charges to prevent a pollution problem. "After all, farmers are supposed to be protecting their food, land, and water." On the other hand, Henning is very glad that someone in the state government has finally decided to address the pollution of Michigan waters. "I am a small family farmer, but I am representing the largest stakeholders in Michigan, the people. We must stop the pollution and make everyone accountable for their actions!"

Care to respond? Send letters to letters@lansingcitypulse.com. View our Letters policy.

Lansing City Pulse (MI)

Date: November 19, 2003

Copyright (c) 2003 Lansing City Pulse. All rights reserved.