

The scent of factory farms

Advertisement

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Imagine the smell of pig manure. Picture thousands of porkers, pound-per-pound far more prolific manure-wise than humans, crammed into a modern "factory farm." Consider the millions of gallons of fetid manure they produce, contained in lagoons the size of football fields. Then get a whiff when this goo is sprayed on nearby cropland, in an attempt to recycle it.

Rather not? Neither would most folks who live downwind. Yet they don't have much recourse now and, depending on the outcome of private negotiations between the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the industry, they may not have any for the foreseeable future.

The EPA is considering industry proposals that effectively would let the industry monitor its own air pollution--and also grant it amnesty for any violations of the Clean Air Act. This potential end run by the industry comes as scientific evidence mounts--no surprise here--that breathing the noxious mix of gases wafting from factory farms with thousands of fowl, pigs or sheep may harm people living nearby.

Yep, this whole deal stinks. At least the EPA ought to conduct open hearings before granting any exemptions to the industry. More properly it should engage state environmental officials concerning the impact of these operations on air quality before pre-empting local regulations.

Illinois has an estimated 500 large factory farms, with at least 10,000 pigs or sheep, or 30,000 chickens or ducks. The state is just circulating draft environmental rules dealing with water pollution caused if manure pools rupture or overflow during heavy rains.

But the smell of these operations is arguably more obnoxious: It's nearly constant, not accidental. There's the rotten-eggs odor of hydrogen sulfide--think back to high school chemistry lab--plus the stinging smell of ammonia. Combined with dust and other chemicals, there is rising evidence of their capacity to sicken people.

Tests in Iowa and North Carolina have documented emissions of hydrogen sulfide and other chemicals that exceed recommended air-quality standards. Reports of neurological damage and other health problems have come from several hog-raising regions, and last year the National Academy of Sciences began studying the issue.

Least surprising of all, a 1989 study in North Carolina found that people exposed to the smell of pig manure for long periods reported more "tension, depression, anger, fatigue and confusion" than folk

breathing clear air. Wonder why.

Sensing a gathering storm of regulations and lawsuits, the industry is proposing to the federal government that it conduct its own studies of the effects of factory farms on clean air but with two killer caveats.

One would be a so-called "safe harbor" amnesty for violators of federal and state clean-air regulations, both retroactively and proactively for two years after the studies are concluded, according to the State and Territorial Air Pollution Program Administrators.

To make matters worse, the EPA also is contemplating declaring emissions wafting from manure pools as "fugitive emissions" not counted under Title V of the Clean Air Act as a "major" source subject to controls.

Add these two provisions together and you get nearly zip regulation of air pollution from factory farms.

No wonder talks between EPA and industry officials are taking place in Washington behind closed doors and far away from folks who have to live with the stench--and are getting surlier by the minute.

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