

*Family farm advocates fight to restrict corporate agriculture*

# Hog Invasion Heads West

*Adapted by Maya Muir from an article by Sara Kendall in Western Organizing Review, the quarterly journal of the Western Organization of Resource Councils.*

**G**iant industrial hog farms, known as Confined Animal Feeding Operations, or CAFOs, have come to dominate pork production in the East and Midwest at the expense of family farms, in part of the overall centralization and industrialization of agriculture that is happening nationally. “This trend is not inevitable,” says a policy statement by the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC), an association of community organizations from Idaho to Colorado. “They are the result of public policy choices. We believe these choices are not sustainable and must be reversed.”

Farm and community activists have been fighting to do just that, state by state, by regulating various aspects of these operations. In response, the industry is setting up facilities or

WORC is supporting members like South Dakota Rural Action in its struggle to regulate hog farms on the state level, and a WORC team is working to change regulations at a federal level, particularly those concerning the environmental impact of these huge facilities. Hog waste is collected in vast lagoons, typically uncovered, which give off noxious odors. Downwind residents of some facilities complain that the incidence of skin sores and other health problems increase after they are built. Contamination of groundwater by the waste is another serious concern.

In the last election, WORC members scored two victories, as South Dakotans and Coloradans voted to further regulate corporate factory farms. In South Dakota, where restrictions on corporate ag are already among the strongest in the nation, voters approved an initiative that expands the state’s restrictions on corporate farming and makes that law part of the state’s constitution. An overwhelming 59 percent of voters supported the initiative, known as Amendment E.

“We’re overjoyed, very happy it passed,” said retired farmer Don Hoogestraat, a member of Dakota Rural Action (DRA), which initiated the Amendment E campaign along with South Dakota Farmers Union. “We’re hoping it will restore our pork industry in South Dakota.” Others hail it for its positive environmental impact.

South Dakota’s corporate farming law is one of a number, most in the Midwest. Wyoming, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Oklahoma and Wisconsin all have laws, some in effect for decades, that try to protect family farming by curbing corporate agriculture in a variety of ways. Not surprisingly, enforcement of these laws has not always been impressive, and the laws themselves have been subject to challenges. In South Dakota, the law already prohibited corporations from owning agricultural land and operating

farms in the state, but agriculture corporations, especially promoters of hog factories, have been getting around the law by

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Impact Visuals

expanding them in states they had previously ignored—where there are, as yet, few regulations—including Wyoming, Idaho, and Utah.

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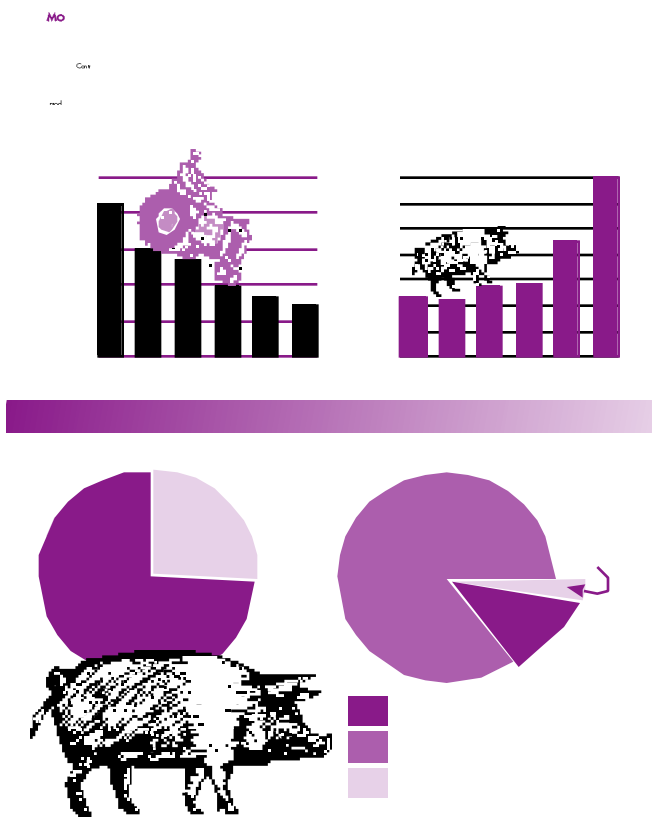
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contracting with family farmers to raise corporate-owned hogs. Amendment E closes this loophole by prohibiting corporations from owning livestock. Family farm corporations and cooperatives are exempt if their members are actively involved in farming operations. Members of Dakota Rural Action believe

opened a can of worms: "It is unfair to family farmers and ranchers, seeks to eliminate financial options to save the family farm and would restrict value-added agricultural development."

But SDAA was dominated by big-money corporate interests, not family farmers. SDAA outspent the Vote YES Coalition by nearly 2-1, raising \$94,337, almost all of it from packers and hog corporations. Major contributors were IBP (\$25,000), John Morrell & Co. (\$20,000), South Dakota Pork Producers Council (\$18,566), Land O Lakes (\$5,000), Murphy Family Farms (\$5,000) and Norwest Bank (\$10,000).

Just two days after the election, SDAA members announced a legal challenge, but DRA members are confident that Amendment E will withstand court scrutiny. Amendment E was modeled after Nebraska's Initiative 300, passed in 1982, which has been upheld by the courts. Of all the states with corporate farming laws, Nebraska's, passed in 1982, is the strictest and most effective. The law is not always enforced, says John Crabtree, of the Center for Rural Affairs in Nebraska, but because it allows citizens to bring action where enforcement is lax, family farm advocates are not powerless. "We've won a number of cases," says Crabtree, "and recently a challenge to that right was struck down." The argument against such laws is that they will scare agriculture away, and Nebraska, like every other hog producing state has lost pork producers. But significantly, Nebraska has retained a higher percentage of producers than any other leading hog state. It also has a higher percentage of smaller operations.



that by protecting South Dakota's family farmers, Amendment E will protect the environment. One of the major reasons for incorporating is to attract capital that will lead to expansion. Amendment E proponents believe there is a direct connection between large, usually corporate-owned livestock operations and environmental degradation.

## Corporate ag funds the opposition

Amendment E's opponents, the South Dakota Agricultural Alliance (SDAA), targeted voters with the message that Amendment E

## Coloradans vote to regulate hog factories

In the last election, Colorado voters also approved a ballot measure targeting hog factories. Amendment 14, which passed by a 63 percent to 37 percent margin, will require groundwater and soil monitoring, covered waste lagoons, permits and inspections for waste disposal systems and assurance that operators can cover the cost of environmental clean ups. Amendment 14 was initiated by a coalition led by the Rocky Mountain Farmers

Union and supported by the Western Colorado Congress, a WORC member.

The hog industry's counter-initiative, Amendment 13, would have required livestock waste from all species to be covered by the same regulations. Its passage would have made Amendment 14, which applies only to hog farms, illegal. This "equal fecal" initiative, as it was called by supporters of increased control over hog operations, was rejected by a 60% to 40% margin.

Brad Anderson, chief executive officer for the Colorado Livestock Association, claimed that hog corporations were at a financial disadvantage due to low hog prices which limited their ability to raise money to fight the initiative, while Amendment 14 opponents spent over \$100,000 more than its backers.

### Resistance to corporate hog farming in Wyoming and Idaho

In Wyoming where beef cattle had once reigned, big hog producers have been looking at expanding operations. Attracted by the dry climate, low taxes, and few environmental regulations, in late 1995, a subsidiary of a Japanese pork company proposed establishing a mammoth site in Platte County, and a second, smaller operation proposed a major expansion.

In reaction, in 1997 concerned citizens successfully proposed a law requiring operations of over 1,000 hogs to provide funds to take care of problems in the case of an accident or the closure of a lagoon, and other restrictions. Laramie and Platt Counties adopted even stricter regulations requiring that large hog operations be respectively three and two miles from domestic wells and stream beds. Since then, while some operations are still talking about expanding, no new permit applications have been filed, according to Vicki Goodwin, organizer for the Powder River Basin Resource Council.

Idaho is still dominated by dairy operations, but the Idaho Department of Agriculture is actively working to attract hog operations. "And producers are interested, primarily, I think, because we currently have so few restrictions," says Frank James of the Idaho Rural Council. "We're working with our membership now to develop a statewide strategy to restrict these hog factories."



### Hog farm invasion in Utah

Until recently, Utah was seen as too arid to attract hog producers, but in 1994, the Circle Four (four major hog producers) started building the nation's largest facility in Milford, in the rural southern portion of the state. (See "No Borders to Justice," Spring 1998) Forty-five thousand brood sows were brought in initially, and plans were made for three more facilities of equal size. "Remember, each sow produces from 20 to 25 babies per year, and each pig produces more than four times as much waste as a human," says local resident A. True Ott. In reaction, Ott and others founded Citizens for Resources and Sustainable Agriculture (CSRA), an organization of local water users worried about the effect of the giant waste lagoons on their aquifer.

Despite expert testimony presented by CSRA to the effect that the proposed expansion is on an old lake bed, a poor choice for containing waste, the county agricultural commissioners have issued permits "illegally, immorally, and unethically," says Ott. "There's no protection here."

It seems clear that industrial hog producers are moving into the Northwest as resistance to their methods of operation grows elsewhere. In light of that, environmentalist's and advocates of the family farm alike can learn from the victories in South Dakota and Colorado. "They are significant," says Idaho Rural Council's Frank James, "particularly when you consider the monumental power and strength corporations of this type have over our lives."

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— A. True Ott

