

Wisconsin Dairy Alliance: Siting Changes Are The Real Horror Story

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It's altogether fitting that the recent Cap Times article penned by Bill Berry appeared two weeks prior to Halloween. In his story Berry paints farmers who own large livestock operations and the organizations that support them as villains who prey on unsuspecting Wisconsin citizens by forcing the growth of evil CAFOs to destroy the water they drink and air they breathe. As in most b-movie horror films, Berry's plot foregoes logic to paint a dark and fictional picture to stir up fear.

There are logical reasons why Wisconsin legislators, a wide representation of Wisconsin agriculture organizations and concerned stakeholders oppose revisions to the existing livestock siting laws. The proposed changes defy logic, place undo burden on local governments and restrict growth for all Wisconsin farming operations.

Siting changes defy logic. A proposed change to siting legislation significantly increases setbacks, or the distance livestock facilities can be from another entity. Not only is the distance from a manure storage facility increased, but the point of reference is changed from where neighbors or receptors are located to any property line. That means a livestock operation that sits next to a third-party owned 100-acre corn field, not near any sort of residence or even an elementary school, would be required to be set back nearly a quarter mile from that property. As Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald and Assembly Speaker Robin Vos state "these extreme setbacks are not designed to promote 'the growth and viability of animal agriculture in this state'", which was the original intent of the siting law when it was put in place in 2006.

All expansion is restricted. Greater siting restrictions handcuff many operations that wish to expand, not just the bigger livestock operations that want to grow. Small and mid-sized operations that want to expand to fit in a son or daughter who want to come back to the operation will have greater difficulty making that happen. That restricts that farm's ability to not only create a viable future, but take advantage of the economies of scale afforded to larger operations. Bigger farms don't necessarily need to get bigger to survive, but farmers who own small to mid-size operations who want to grow won't be afforded that opportunity.

Local governments beware. The proposed changes add to the pile of responsibility already heaped on financially and resource-strapped local governments. Under the existing law, local governments could take concerns or complaints to the Livestock Siting Review Board, an entity that has been nearly non-existent because few issues have arisen that required its attention. Most recent issues have centered on approvals for operational restrictions, not setback or odor issues. Proposed changes would create a host of operational conditions for local officials to choose from, most of which are already covered under other laws. It's another layer of bureaucracy and red tape that the existing siting rules were designed to avoid.

The perceived unrelentless, unregulated growth of big business at the expense of the small and helpless is an easy, although fictional, story to write. When the existing siting laws were drafted, a bipartisan group of legislators and stakeholders from across Wisconsin agriculture came together to develop regulations that made sense. People in Wisconsin have lived mostly peacefully under those regulations for 13 years, with a few changes for the better along the way. The potential outcomes from fixing something that isn't broken is the real horror story waiting to be written.