

CAFOs

Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations

SOCIAL/ECONOMIC ISSUES

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Agricultural Economics

CAFOs and Community Conflict: *Understanding Community Conflict*

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Introduction

The expansion of CAFOs in Indiana has created high levels of conflict in communities, largely because people disagree over the permitting of operations, location of the facilities, and their impacts on the community. The stakes are high, and conflicts are emotionally charged. CAFO owners, other farmers, neighbors, and elected officials are pitted against one another, often-times damaging relationships for years.

Are there better ways of dealing with such complex and controversial issues? This series on community conflict is intended to help people involved with CAFO issues deal with their differences in more effective and constructive ways. This publication is intended to provide a better understanding of CAFOs as a source of community conflict.

Understanding CAFOs as Public Issues

CAFOs are private decisions that become public issues. As such, they have several distinct characteristics that make them complex and controversial.

Private and public decision making. CAFOs, like many other public issues, start as private decisions made by individuals or business entities. Producers are interested in developing economically viable agricultural operations and therefore want to either expand their current operation to a CAFO, or introduce a new operation into the community. The issue moves, often very quickly, from a private business decision



into the public realm when there is a perceived threat to the health, safety, or welfare of the citizens. Consequently, public bodies become involved in the issue ultimately making policy decisions that result in state regulations (e.g., Indiana's Department of Environmental Management's permitting process), local land use zoning ordinances, or the expenditure of tax dollars. As public decisions, they affect the broader community and have long-term consequences.

- *Complexity of the issue.* The "CAFO issue" is not a single issue with a simple solution. While any one person may view the issue from a particular perspective, or area of concern, such as economics, air and water quality, or community quality of life, in reality there are a multitude of economic, social, environmental, and political issues inextricably woven together.
- *Multiple stakeholders.* There are many stakeholders in this conflict — producers,

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state agricultural organizations, agricultural businesses, state agencies, local plan commissions and decision makers, environmental groups, the broader rural community, and many others. Each stakeholder views CAFOs from a different perspective, with different information and knowledge about the issue and with different interests to be served.

- *Role of the news media.* CAFOs are public issues, and they are played out in the public arena. The news media is critical in shaping how the issues are defined, how they are discussed and deliberated, how the public understands the issues, and, ultimately, how the issues are resolved.
- *Public deliberation.* The complexity of the issues, the involvement of multiple stakeholders, and the resulting need for public policies, necessitates that, in a democratic society, such issues be discussed and deliberated in an open, public process. Public policies have trade-offs that may benefit some stakeholders and disadvantage others. It is important that multiple perspectives be heard and considered in order for elected officials to make informed decisions

Understanding Sources of Conflict

In general, there are five major sources of public conflict. Complex issues, such as CAFOs, have multiple sources.

- *Data.* Information is one of the primary sources of conflict. There may be too much information, not enough information, different views of what data are important, different interpretations of data, misinformation, and even conflicting data. Experts don't always agree. People can work through such differences through more effective communication and a collaborative problem solving process.
- *Structure.* Some conflicts may center on who has the authority to regulate and/or monitor CAFO operations and land use. Is this the responsibility of state agencies? Local government? Producers? The uncertainty of who makes which decisions and/or the imbalance in power among outside agencies, corporations, and local decision makers is an issue in some rural counties. The changing structure of agricultural operations and the globalization of markets are also examples of structural issues that

create ever-changing circumstances. Structural issues are difficult to negotiate.

- *Relationships.* Because stakes are high with CAFOs, emotions run high. Often, there is poor communication, miscommunication, or no communication at all between the parties. There may be misperceptions or stereotypes of CAFO owners or of their employees who may be "outsiders." Assumptions are made. Little, if any, trust may exist between the different parties. Relationships are fragile, at best. The parties involved can work to build better relationships with each other.
- *Values.* Values may be at the heart of the conflict. People have different ideas about what is desirable and important, and consequently have different goals. To debate values is not useful and often escalates the conflict. Ethically speaking, values are not negotiated because they are part of people's identity; it is demeaning to place one set of values over another. It is helpful to move the conversation to people's concerns, where their interests can be negotiated.
- *Interests.* People frequently enter into public meetings with their minds made up, with a solution they have already decided upon — their "position." They are either in favor of the CAFO, or against it. When people are locked into their "positions," it sets up a dueling situation to see which side wins. A more useful approach is to focus on people's "interests," and what motivates them to form their position. One way to identify underlying interests is to ask the question, "Why do you support (or oppose) the CAFO?" When people understand their interests, and those of other parties, creative options can be explored, interests can be negotiated and, perhaps, decisions can be made to meet the needs of both parties.

Conclusion

CAFO expansion in Indiana has created deeply dividing conflicts in rural communities with far-reaching consequences. When a CAFO is proposed, the conflict escalates very quickly. People immediately take sides (either for it or against it), their positions harden, communication stops, perceptions become distorted, and unrealistic goals are advocated. This causes the conflict to escalate. As the conflict spirals up, people become more polarized

from one another, less interested in resolving their differences and more interested in “winning.”

Such behavior is not only stressful, it takes a toll on the psychological well being of everyone involved. It’s not useful because it does little to address the issues or real concerns and, in fact, exacerbates the conflict. A more constructive approach is a collaborative problem-solving process that brings people with different views together early on, before people are locked into their positions, to discuss the issues, exchange data and information, and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited perspective of what is desirable or possible. Elected officials’ and citizens’ understanding of CAFOs as public issues and the sources of conflict is only one component of a collaborative process.

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