

Gather¹

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Environmental Contamination — The Factory farm: good or bad?

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Introduction:

Over the years the United States has prospered greatly due in part to our economic system of capitalism. This free market system allows innovation and modernization of current practices, making the production of any good or service more efficient over time. Like the automotive and textile industries; the agriculture industry has had its share of innovations and modernizations from the mechanized plow to mechanized slaughter houses. One such innovation was more abstract, a theory or plan for a super farm. These “factory” farms as they are called, began as early as the 1920s, and became increasingly popular, currently the dominate method of farming within the United States today.

The plan does not require animals to exercise or absorb sunlight, both necessary components to growth. This has increased the availability of meat, eggs and milk. Thus decreasing prices consumers pay for these products, which is good. However, we may also consider the ethical debate the plan raises; weighing whether or not the lower prices and increased availability are worth the negative externalities this process creates.

There are two ethical debates involving “factory” farming, the environmental issue relating to pollution and the moral issue of animal treatment. Due to my knowledge and passion for the environment the focus of this essay will be the ethical debate whether “factory” farming should be held accountable and penalized for the contamination of the air and water in its vicinity.

Claim:

Factory farms are contaminating the air and water ways because of the over whelming amount of fecal matter generated by large, concentrated animal populations. These farms are often referred to as Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO), currently there are no state or federal emissions regulations governing this industry (Air Pollution from Factory Farms, 2004). Therefore they aren't doing anything illegal, yet.

While there may not be any legislation to protect our lungs or the environment, there is substantial evidence that chemicals released from such establishments are harmful and damaging. In one study in North Carolina affected residents experienced higher levels of tension, depression, and fatigue; in addition to increased occurrences of asthma, bronchial irritation and flu-like symptoms (Air Pollution from Factory Farms, 2004). A primary component of animal waste is nitrogen, as the waste sits it releases a great deal of this gas in the form of ammonia (NH₃). Which is then present in the air; when it rains the air which is made up of water vapors, now laden with ammonia spreads the ammonia to the ground which can lead to contamination of waterways. Excess levels of nitrogen are harmful especially in water ways, as the nitrogen increases the amount of algae, decreasing the amount oxygen which will kill off fish and other aquatic life dependent on oxygen. In some areas “factory” farms, specifically those specializing in hogs, produce more nitrogen then other small farms and industrial corporations combined (Air Pollution from Factory Farms, 2004). “Water tables are falling, and water is becoming increasingly scarce” therefore, more than ever we need to keep what little water that is still available clean and free of harmful contaminants (Egendorf pg 24, 1999). This industry is a very large source of unregulated contamination. The reason this is an ethical debate is that there is good from “factory” farms, the question is whether or not it is enough to over come all the bad. Whether “factory” farms are put out of business via legislation or not doesn't matter to me, however they must be controlled and held to some standard.

The argument that they are dealing with animals, and animals produce waste is not valid in this sense. This is because it is not a small farm supporting a small town or family, it is a large factory, which has the same goals as factories producing cars or computers; to make a profit. The fact that it is a profit driven factory should put it into a different category making it liable for the pollution it is known to produce.

The Federal Clean Air Act of the 1970's defines hazardous air pollutants as “air pollutants . . . which in judgment of the Administrator may cause, or contribute to, an increase in mortality or an increase in serious irreversible or incapacitating irreversible, illness” (pg 343). This definition seems to fit the “factory” farms, because the chemicals released

are known to have various harmful implications. The government needs to redefine the categories which potential polluters fall under. For instance this type of farm should be seen in the same light as an automotive corporation, and neither deserve to be granted immunity.

The environmental effects of this industry do not only have health related implications, but also economic. House values in affected areas have seen a steady decrease in market value. Since housing is a very influential sector this can create a “domino” effect, with house values unstable the taxable value decreases which can lead to lower budgets for all town entities, specifically the school department. Decreasing educational standards based on a budget can have a serious impact on the quality of life and the future of effected families.

Rebuttal

Despite the large amount of animal waste, which is to be expected from an operation of this size, “factory” farming has many positive attributes. The discovery and greater understanding of vitamins and nutrition has allowed the creation of processed feed, which is rich in all the necessary vitamins for growth. This has lead to year-round farming in smaller facilities. No longer are large pastures needed in order for the animals to graze and absorb sunlight; dramatically reducing needed resource area and cost. Some also argue, “The harm and damage already done to humanity by the continued existence of capitalism . . . is beyond exact calculation” (Egendorf pg 24, 1999). Therefore corporations like “factory” farms are only doing what they thought they could do, creating more efficient production. Also the media clearly uses their power and “reputation” to sway the viewing audience; many news reports of the years have exaggerated pollution and made it seem like all the air, food and water we consume is harmful to our health. While this is not entirely false, they have forced viewers to make a bigger deal out of potentially less threatening situations. The “factory” farms have reduced the cost associated with their products, in addition to increase availability of products throughout the year.

Possible Solution

A possible solution to this dilemma may be found over seas. Japan has a different way of approaching this issue of environmental contamination. Instead of having a government agency like the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) they have a system that is more social than governmental. This “social accounting” plan, as it is called, is stricken from business ledgers and is seen as the most beneficial means of dealing with such problems (Denenberg). The basic idea of the Japanese philosophy is that: an individual person or group presents their case to a company; arguing that they have been effected in some capacity by the chemicals which caused, death or severe illness (Denenberg). In many cases “victims” are compensated monetarily for the damages. This plan has decreased pollution for Japan. It has used money to persuade companies to admit when they are in the wrong and pay for the mistakes, when the costs get to high they have to conserve, in this case not polluting (Denenberg).

This is an interesting solution to the problem and while it does compenstate the victims, there is no required reduction in pollution. Also the “clever” accounting which leaves business ledgers clean of such payments, most likely would not be welcomed into the United States since the Arthur Anderson case.

Conclusion

Pollution can be thought of as the foot print of capitalism, after all without capitalism, the wide spread industrialization of America and the world may not have been possible, or at least not as fast and not on such a large scale. But that doesn't have to be it. We can also say that technology and industry grew faster in some respects than our complete understanding and knowledge of the environment. From there we can say we want to leave a different foot print, one that is only a slight indent in the floor of the environment.

Corporations big and small, who produce something for profit, should automatically be considered in one category which has the same fair emission standards for all involved parties, consumers and producers. We should devise a system which forces all members of society to be honest and accountable for the pollution they generate. Pollution can be reduced to the point where it is no longer an issue and the eco-system evolves to the point where we are no longer harming the environment.

Works Cited

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Notes

¹<http://www.gather.com/viewArticle.action?articleId=281474976722919>