

One CAFO Owner Produces 5 Million Polluting Pigs

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✓ Fact Checked

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Jeff Hansen founded Iowa Select Farms in the early 1990s and has grown the hog CAFO into a machine with political influence that drives the growth of the CAFO industry in Iowa
- › Pollution from pig CAFOs sends a steady stream of toxins into the surrounding air and nitrogen and phosphorus into the waterways, where it pollutes surface and ground water, and is responsible for algae overgrowth and the creation of water dead zones
- › People in the surrounding communities are faced with the stench, flies, rats and vultures from the "farms," where animal carcasses are left to rot and local waterways are unusable
- › You have an impact on the industry when you vote with your pocketbook and avoid the purchase of CAFO meat. Seek out pasture-raised pork from trusted local farmers or look for the American Grassfed Association logo on meat from the store

Jeff Hansen's hog farming is a story that is as old as time. The growth of his concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO) over the past 30 years produced over 5 million pigs brought to market in 2020.¹ But, this is not a rags-to-riches story that people in Iowa are championing – unless, of course, you're being paid to.

Since man began bartering for goods, and later developed a monetary system, there have been people more interested in acquiring wealth than in protecting their community. In the present time, this short-sighted, wealth-driven vision is often surreptitiously covered by a strong public relations campaign and underpinned with political contributions.

This describes the outcome of many individuals who have made their money on the backs of low paid workers and damaged communities. The siren song of growing wealth appears to cloud recognition of their responsibility for the human and environmental waste they leave behind. The history of Iowa Select Farms is one such story.

Hansen Takes Hold in Iowa

Vox² tells Hanson's story, which began like most other entrepreneurs'. Faced with a difficult and physically taxing situation, he developed labor-saving options that helped to lighten the load and manage the small herd of pigs he and his wife kept.

Then in the early 1990s he acquired a loan to build a business around providing automated systems to hog farmers. It wasn't long before his small concern was bringing in \$90 million a year to assemble **confinement sheds** where pigs were bred, raised and kept before slaughter.

To house large numbers of animals indoors, the buildings must be built over grates where manure and urine can fall into deep pools below the animals. The buildings also need powerful exhaust fans to send the ammonia-rich air outside. Without these fans, the animals would die within hours.

The growth of the hog barons in Iowa was fueled in part by trade agreements that opened the world market and economists who let it be known to Iowa legislators that if the state were friendly to agribusinesses that wanted to grow hog CAFOs, the potential for financial growth for the state could be massive.

Another factor in the growth of the industry was that large meat packers found buying consistently produced pigs was more profitable than purchasing from different independent growers. To attract CAFO producers, they offered locked-in prices that were not affected by market fluctuations.

By 1992, Hansen began keeping his own hogs and incorporated Iowa Select Farms. Within four years he had grown his herd from 10,000 sows to 62,000; by 1999 his 96,000

sows were producing 1.7 million pigs that he brought to market. It is not the Iowa Select Farms' success that is at issue but, rather, the devastating impact it has on people's health and the environmental impact throughout the state.

Yet, despite consistent pushback from communities throughout Iowa, the state legislators were unwilling to consider the long-term consequences, and instead appeared to focus on the short-term financial gains. For example, Gov. Kim Reynolds' election was supported by a six-figure contribution from Hansen.

Reynolds is up for reelection in 2022 and she has spent her tenure in office supporting CAFO expansion in the state, which likely earned her another campaign contribution to support her reelection efforts.

Why Are Pigs Bad Neighbors?

The collection of manure and urine must go somewhere. One of the environmental hazards from CAFOs is the **water pollution** that results from excess nutrients in the waste lagoons.³ This leads to algae overgrowth in waterways, ultimately depleting oxygen in the water, killing fish and other marine life, and making the water unfit for use.

The industry claims this manure can be used as fertilizer in the surrounding farmlands,⁴ which are growing grain to feed the pigs. However, it sends a steady stream of nitrogen and phosphorus into surface and groundwater. This potentially spreads disease-causing organisms from the feces of animals that often are **fed antibiotics** to keep them in confined spaces.

It also delivers an unsustainable amount of **nutrients into the waterways**. For example, the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico⁵ is the largest recorded **dead zone** in the world. It begins in the Mississippi River delta and spans more than 8,700 square miles. It is a result of "Nitrogen and phosphorus used as farm fertilizers flowing off farmlands and into the Mississippi River watershed."⁶

Despite being treated with antibiotics, the hogs can spread diseases to humans. For example, the porcine deltacoronavirus, which was first identified in 2012 in China,⁷ has

recently shown the potential to leap to humans.⁸ This sometimes-fatal virus causes diarrhea and vomiting in pigs.

Antibiotic-resistant diseases are also spread through CAFOs.⁹ Research published in Clinical Infectious Diseases in 2015¹⁰ showed workers at pig farms are six times more likely to carry **multi-drug resistant MRSA** than those who are not exposed to CAFO pigs.

Studies have also demonstrated that MRSA is aerosolized outside and downwind of a pig CAFO,¹¹ which bodes danger for those who are living near fields where the waste is being sprayed as fertilizer.

As Vox reports,¹² residents in Iowa also must deal with piles of pig carcasses that litter the roadways, attracting flies, rats and vultures and contributing to the stench in the community. The growth of hog farming in the area has changed the balance of the population so pigs now outnumber people 7-to-1.

These Actions Are Destroying More Than Iowa

Make no mistake, the decisions of the Iowa legislature to roll back regulations and allow the development of more confinements, housing pigs in pitiful conditions, is also affecting surrounding states. Despite the regulatory actions taken by the legislature in Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Nebraska, South Dakota and Missouri, pollution knows no boundaries.

According to the report in Vox,¹³ Hansen's operation employs over 7,400 people and has built hundreds of confinement sheds. Led by Hansen, the pork industry has developed relationships with both Republicans and Democrats to ensure protection in the legislature and their growth.

As has been demonstrated by the devastation to the Gulf of Mexico, pollution from agribusinesses travels down waterways, reaching far outside the confines of the state borders. So, while Iowa legislators are being courted by the hog industry and rolling back regulations to allow further growth, their decisions are impacting more than the people in their state.

If you don't live in Iowa, or near a CAFO, it may be easy to overlook the human health and environmental impact of this type of pollution. However, people living in the immediate vicinity recognize many of the health effects documented in one study¹⁴ of North Carolina communities located near CAFOs.

The researchers compared the rates of health conditions in communities close by and further away from hog CAFOs and found those living closer had higher all-cause and infant mortality, higher hospital admissions, higher numbers of low-birth-weight infants and a greater number of people dying from kidney disease, septicemia, tuberculosis and anemia.

CAFO supporters may cite a 2017 study¹⁵ to bolster their argument that the farms help the economic growth of rural communities. Yet, as Vox reports, Dave Swenson from Iowa State University believes that despite the employment opportunity, “the overall economy has continued to degrade,” telling the reporter:¹⁶

“There’s no evidence that [confinements] have slowed population drain in my opinion. They’re actually one of the key mechanisms for driving people out of rural areas, despite the claims to the contrary.”

The reason becomes more obvious when you learn that one former driver from Iowa Select Farms spoke to a reporter from The Guardian in 2019, telling them he earned \$23,000 a year for the privilege of working 12-hour days without overtime. He said, “These companies claim they’re creating all these jobs, but who’s coming? Not people with families who create communities.”¹⁷

Hansen Takes a Page From Bill Gates’ Playbook

The power of charitable donations has reigned supreme in the aftermath of Bill Gates’ tussle with the Federal Trade Commission and [antitrust lawsuits](#). And, it appears that Hansen has taken a page from Gates’ playbook when he organized the Deb and Jeff Hansen Foundation.¹⁸

The foundation was formed in 2006, just 10 years after Iowa Select Farms began expanding quickly. It boasts 800 hog farms across the state and claims to partner with more than 650 farmers.¹⁹ In addition to an impressive public relations team, the foundation also hosts a spring gala to raise funds for the foundation.

In 2016, they announced their supporters had raised over \$1.1 million that would be used to fund the Power Snack Program, Pork Care Package Program and Children's Cancer Connections Hansen Home for Hope.²⁰ The power behind his charitable donations and work in the community has all but hidden the political power he wields.

For example, in an exposé published in early 2021, *The Intercept*²¹ details the saga in which a former truck driver for Iowa Select Farms, Lucas Walker, attempted to blow the whistle on the corporation for breaking many of the state rules that limit the size and number of animals.

Unable to get traction with regulatory officials, he met Direct Action Everywhere, a global network of animal rights activists.²² It seemed this was the only organization interested in hearing his concerns. Soon afterward, the [global pandemic closed slaughterhouses](#) and Iowa Select chose to use a particularly brutal way of slaughtering thousands of their animals.²³

The process is called ventilation shutdown in which the large fans are shut off and steam is pumped into the barns. Walker decided to expose the farm, which led to an investigation by *The Intercept* and the publication of a video “showing young pigs squealing as they slowly roasted to death.”²⁴

The controversy brought international attention to Iowa Select, and consequently to Walker when the company discovered he had communicated with Direct Action Everywhere. The power behind Iowa Select was demonstrated when they brought in the FBI to turn Walker as an informant on the activist group. A spokesperson from Direct Action Everywhere talked with *The Intercept* reporter, saying:²⁵

“The federal government knows that criminalizing peaceful speech activity is a sham, and that the general public is on our side. But they’re also beholden to the undue influence of companies like Iowa Select Farms. It’s telling to see the

roundabout lengths they'll resort to in trying to undermine our work – and keep the public from knowing the truth.”

Your Pocketbook Can Protect Your Health and the Environment

People living in areas populated by CAFOs often feel helpless against the giant multinational corporations that are ruining their lives. It's a good sign that some residents have won lawsuits and have been awarded damages for their hardships,²⁶ but the amounts are unlikely to prompt change within the industry.

Instead, the solution lies in changing agricultural practices from industrial to **regenerative**. You can vote with your pocketbook by seeking out pasture-raised pork and avoiding CAFO meat. Each time you buy any CAFO product you are supporting an industry that produces poor quality food, damages communities and acts as if they are above the law.

I encourage you to **avoid CAFO meat** and either buy your meat directly from a trusted grass fed farmer or look for the **American Grassfed Association (AGA)** logo. This is a much-needed grass fed standard and certification for American grown grass fed meat and dairy.

The AGA is intended to ensure the humane treatment of animals and meet consumer expectations about grass fed meat and dairy, while being feasible for small farmers to achieve.

Whether you consider purchasing from small family farms for environmental, ethical or house reasons – or all the above – when you do so you're protecting your health and the environment. You're also taking a stand for people unfortunate enough to live near any CAFO and find themselves with little opportunity to fight back.

Sources and Reference

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