

How China Is Destroying American Farmland

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

✓ Fact Checked

July 06, 2023

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › North Carolina is the home of more than 2,000 large-scale hog farms, primarily clustered in the rural eastern region of the state. More than 200 of them are owned or operated by Smithfield Foods, the largest pork producer in the world
- › In 2013, Smithfield was sold to the WH Group, a Chinese pork conglomerate accused of feeding its hogs illegal chemicals. WH Group takes direction from the Chinese government, as “pork is considered a national-security issue in China”
- › The Chinese government uses private entities as proxies for state power. In 2011, it directed Chinese companies to buy foreign food producers and farmland. Over the next two years, Chinese nationals went from owning \$81 million worth of American farmland to nearly \$1.4 billion
- › Smithfield was an attractive acquisition because the cost of raising pork in North Carolina is about half that of raising them in China, due to lax environmental protections. In China, hog farmers must pay for wastewater treatment, digester systems to convert manure into a natural gas, and odor control systems to shield nearby residents from the stench
- › In 2014, hundreds of residents filed more than two dozen lawsuits against the WH Group arguing that the hog farms “made life unbearable.” Smithfield lost the five bellwether cases and settled the remaining cases out of court. Still, while sending a message of discontent, it doesn’t change how hogs are raised in North Carolina or anywhere else in the U.S.

North Carolina is the home of more than 2,000 large-scale hog farms, primarily clustered in the rural eastern region of the state. As illustrated in the Vox video above, factory scale hog farming takes a tremendous toll on the surrounding environment, as hog excrement ends up polluting waterways, land and air.

More than 200 of these North Carolina hog farms are owned or operated by Smithfield Foods,¹ the largest pork producer in the world, which in 2013 was acquired by the WH Group, a Chinese pork conglomerate that had previously been accused of feeding its hogs illegal chemicals.²

But as reported by Rolling Stone magazine in 2018, that wasn't the only safety concern raised by the sale:³

"The Chinese government had a track record of using nominally private entities as proxies for state power ... In 2011 ... the government issued a plan directing Chinese companies to buy foreign food producers and farmland. In two years, Chinese nationals went from owning \$81 million worth of American farmland to nearly \$1.4 billion ...

The investigative news organization Reveal uncovered documents showing that WH Group receives guidance from the government, which a company executive explained was because 'pork is considered a national-security issue in China' ...

Part of what made the company such an attractive target is that it's about 50% cheaper to raise hogs in North Carolina than in China. This is due to less-expensive pig-feed prices and larger farms, but it's also because of loose business and environmental regulations ... which have made the U.S. an increasingly attractive place for foreign companies to offshore costly and harmful business practices."

China Dumps Its Agricultural Waste in the US

In years past, the U.S. outsourced dirty industry processes to poorer countries. Today, China is doing the same, and it's treating the U.S. as a developing nation. Granted, U.S.

environmental policies – which have gotten increasingly lax over time due to regulatory capture by industry – are what allows for this “hostile takeover” in the first place.

Believe it or not, China doesn’t allow hog waste to be sprayed on fields as a means of disposal, as is routinely done here in the U.S. In China, hog farmers are forced to spend big bucks on wastewater treatment, digester systems to convert manure into a natural gas, and odor control systems to shield nearby residents from the stench.⁴

All of that makes pork about twice as expensive to produce in China than the U.S. Usha Haley, a professor at West Virginia University who has studied the Chinese takeover of American agricultural assets for well over a decade, told Rolling Stone:⁵

“China will not care about the health of people living beside the hog farms. China will act in its own self-interest to leave the pollution here but take the valuable clean pork back to China.”

One year after Smithfield was gobbled up by the WH Group, 500 residents filed more than two dozen lawsuits against the company, arguing that the hog farms “made life unbearable.”⁶

By early 2020, five of the lawsuits had gone to trial, and Smithfield lost them all. In each case, the jury unanimously concluded there had been an “unreasonable and substantial interference with the reasonable enjoyment of the [plaintiff’s] property.”⁷

In all, Chinese-owned Smithfield was ordered to pay \$550 million in damages, later reduced to \$98 million due to a state cap on punitive damages.⁸ According to Corporate Crime Reporter, Smithfield settled the remaining cases out of court.⁹ Still, while sending a message of discontent, it doesn’t change how hogs are raised in NC or anywhere else in the U.S.

Hog Farms Wreak Havoc

Thousands of pigs are kept permanently indoors in these industrial “farms,” known as concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). Urine and feces are piped outside into

a giant open lagoon, and when the lagoon gets full, the waste is sprayed onto nearby fields. As explained in the VOX video above:

“Spraying and lagoons have air quality risks. When bacteria breaks the waste down, it releases hundreds of compounds, like methane, carbon dioxide, ammonia, hydrogen sulfide and dust into the air. These can cause asthma, respiratory diseases, headaches and nausea.”

Indeed, several studies have concluded that living near CAFOs has a detrimental impact on health. For example, one 2018 study by Duke University found that people living in close proximity of hog CAFOs have:¹⁰

- Higher all-cause mortality
- Higher infant mortality and low birthweight
- Higher mortality due to anemia, kidney disease, tuberculosis and septicemia

The massive amounts of hog waste produced by these industrial farms also pollute well water and surface water with nitrates, phosphorous and fecal bacteria, which in turn contributes to algae blooms that kill fish and can cause life-threatening illness in humans.

The largest cluster of hog farms in NC also happens to be located in a coastal floodplain, which further heightens this water pollution risk, as storm flooding washes the hog waste into the surrounding ecosystem.

Residents living near hog farms also must deal with dead hog carcasses that attract flies and buzzards. As noted by Corporate Crime Reporter,¹¹ “The cheapest way of disposing of hogs is to throw them out into the open hot air.” So, that’s what most of them do.

Sometimes these temporary disposal areas are right beside a private residence. Every few days, a truck will come by to pick up the carcasses, which are then transported to processing plants that use them for dog food and other products.

Ecological Discrimination

Approximately 56% to 69% of residents in this area of NC are persons of color, and up to 64.5% live in poverty.¹² According to residents, this makes the hog farm pollution more than just an environmental issue. It's also a civil rights issue. As reported by Vox in April 2022:¹³

"In January, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) launched an investigation into a discrimination claim brought by an NGO representing several community groups.

The inquiry seeks to answer whether or not the state's environmental department racially discriminated against residents when permitting several hog factory farms to convert their waste into fuel.

The EPA's probe is the latest development in a decades-long battle in North Carolina against what residents affected by factory farm pollution say is a form of 'environmental racism,' a term used to describe the disproportionate impacts of pollution – whether from agriculture or urban power plants – on communities of color."

Biogas Permits Will Further Impact Underprivileged Residents

You'd think this kind of pollution would be curbed by the federal Clean Water Act and other environmental regulations, but that's not the case. As noted by Vox, the EPA primarily regulates only the largest concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs).

Besides, getting rid of hog waste by spraying it on fields is perfectly legal, even though nearby residents end up getting showered with fecal matter on a regular basis and can't open their windows or even their mouths when the wind blows in their direction. And now, their situation may get even worse.

In 2021, North Carolina regulators authorized four Smithfield-owned CAFOs to convert their animal waste into biogas fuel by installing anaerobic digestion systems, all without

conducting a comprehensive impact analysis or including air and water mitigation requirements.

This development is what led to the most recent Civil Rights Act complaint, filed by the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC) against the NC Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ).^{14,15} As reported by NC News Online:¹⁶

“SELC alleges that when DEQ granted the general permits to the Smithfield-owned farms, the agency failed to protect the surrounding communities from air and water pollution.

A disproportionate share of the hundreds of families who live around the hog operations in Duplin and Sampson County are Black and Latino. Under a federal civil rights law, known as Title VI, entities that receive federal funds can't from discriminate on the basis of race, color, or national origin – intentionally or unintentionally.”

Biogas Will Make a Bad Situation Worse

As if that's not bad enough, the 2021 Farm Bill passed by the North Carolina General Assembly also calls for the creation of a general permit for biogas production from CAFO waste, which will make it easier for other farms to follow suit. And, as you'd expect from captured legislators, the draft of this general permit contains the same deficiencies as the four individual permits initially issued. As noted by the SELC in a supplement to its original complaint:¹⁷

“While it is unknown exactly how many of these operations will apply for coverage under the Digester General Permit, the impacts and harms from these operations are likely to be felt disproportionately by the Black, Latino and Native American communities that more commonly live near industrial hog operations.

Like the individual permits, industrial hog operations permitted under the Digester General Permit will produce dangerous new waste streams that will harm people living nearby ... these operations will be authorized to dig new hog

waste lagoons or cap existing unlined ones, install digester systems, store digester waste in open-air potentially unlined lagoons, and spray the ammonia-rich digester waste on fields across eastern North Carolina.

Since Complainants filed their complaint last September, the harms authorized by North Carolina's issuance of the individual permits and the general permit have become even more evident. As stated in Complainants' 2021 complaint to OECRC, digester systems exacerbate pollution and negatively impact human health.

Several studies have shown that digester waste emits substantially more ammonia than hog waste from conventional lagoons.

A study co-authored by North Carolina State University's Dr. Viney Aneja found that digester waste stored in uncovered secondary lagoons emits more ammonia per-hog than conventional hog waste in a lagoon ... emissions from the open lagoon portion of the hog operation specifically increased by 66% relative to conventional lagoons.

The removal of carbon from a digester makes the remaining nitrogen and phosphorus in the digester waste more soluble and decreases dry matter in the waste, both of which can increase the ability of pollutants to infiltrate soil and contaminate groundwater.

As a result, a leak or overflow from a lagoon storing digester waste can be even more devastating for the environment than a leak or overflow from a conventional lagoon. The heightened risk of water pollution persists when, after being stored in the secondary lagoons, the digester waste is sprayed on nearby fields.

When the waste is sprayed from high pressure hoses ... more ammonia volatilizes and enters the atmosphere, where it compromises local air quality, drives particulate matter formation, and ultimately deposits in nearby waterways as nitrogen or nitrate."

More Than a Nuisance

As explained in The Outline article,¹⁸ hog farms have been the center of lawsuits for centuries. Hog sties stink, but with the emergence of CAFOs that house thousands of hogs at a time, neighbors have more than a never-ending stench to contend with.

“ My right to use my property ends where my property right is infringing on your right to use your property. ~ Ryke Longest, director of Duke University’s Environmental Law and Policy Clinic ”

At the end of the day, most of the lawsuits today center around the fact that CAFOs are being built in rural areas where people are already living, thereby encroaching on their right to enjoy their own homes and properties.

As explained by Ryke Longest, director of Duke University’s Environmental Law and Policy Clinic, “My right to use my property ends where my property right is infringing on your right to use your property.”¹⁹

Lawsuits against hog CAFOs are always referred to as “nuisance lawsuits,” but a farm spraying liquid dung that drifts and settles all over your house, car and yard is more than a nuisance. It robs you of your quality of life and can have serious health ramifications to boot.

Despite that, in 2017, the North Carolina legislature implemented new rules to limit “nuisance damages” to fair-market value only, which, of course, dramatically declines as soon as a CAFO is erected nearby. That year, they passed another law limiting nuisance lawsuits to properties located within a half-mile of the source, even though the smell and liquid dung mist from a hog CAFO can carry a lot further than that.²⁰

Several other laws have also been passed to protect hog CAFOs from residents. For example, farm records have been made private and confidential to restrict access and anti-gag laws make it a misdemeanor for processing plant employees to share

information. Other laws restrict the use of drones and make it more difficult to sue a CAFO if you move away and then come back.²¹

Liberties Robbed

The Outline²² recounts the story of Elsie Herring, born and raised in Duplin County, North Carolina, which is where CAFOs have proliferated the most.

“The Major Murray Farm, a CAFO, was built next to Elsie Herring’s family’s land in 1986 ... One Saturday in the mid-’90s, after Herring had moved back to her family’s land to help care for her mother and brother, she said her family was enjoying an afternoon on the porch when the hog farm began spraying waste in the direction of the nearby homes, forcing her family to ‘scramble’ inside to get away.

‘I grew up in that house, but I had never experienced anything like this before. The waste had this terrible, raw, stinking odor that we had never before experienced. We could still smell it when we were inside,’ Herring recounted in testimony she gave to a congressional committee ...

‘We don’t cook out, we don’t sit out, we don’t invite people over ... All of those liberties were taken away from us ... In addition to the smell, Herring has said that flies ‘and other recurring nuisances’ caused by the farm are prevalent ... including an inability to keep her windows open, which has raised her energy bill ‘substantially.’

Herring also said the spraying has affected her family’s financial security. ‘The value of the land has decreased,’ Herring said. ‘Who would want to come in here near a hog facility?’

Living next to a shit-sprayfield can do a number on your mental health, too. ‘You get angry when they’re spraying this stuff and it stinks ... You can’t keep it out of the house ... Everybody’s got the right to liberty and happiness and to own

property ... We don't want anything in our backyard that you wouldn't put in your backyard."

We Need Real Change

Without doubt, we need real change in the U.S. — change that will put an end to China viewing our land as a sewer. Such change won't come easily, however, seeing how legislators and regulators alike are in the pocket of industry and place their own greed ahead of human health and well-being.

If China can implement wastewater treatment and odor control systems, there's no reason we can't. Poor rural residents, most of whom can't afford to move even if they wanted to, should not have to pay for cheap bacon with their very lives.

Aside from that, clean soil and water is something that is of concern for all of us, and both need protection from CAFOs in the form of strict regulations. We also ought to have restrictions on the sale of agricultural assets to foreign nationals.

All of that said, I don't recommend eating CAFO pork to begin with, as most [pork producers use mRNA "vaccines"](#) on their herds. Conventional pork is also very high in [linoleic acid](#), which I believe is a major driver of chronic disease.

Sources and References

- [1, 6, 18, 19, 20, 22 The Outline February 20, 2020](#)
- [2, 3, 5 Rolling Stone March 19, 2018](#)
- [4, 7, 9, 11, 21 Corporate Crime Reporter October 4, 2022](#)
- [8 Daniels Fund Smithfield Reach Settlement](#)
- [10 NC Medical Journal September-October 2018; 79\(5\): 278-288](#)
- [12 YouTube Vox 2022 4:15 minutes](#)
- [13 Vox April 1, 2022](#)
- [14 Inside Climate News January 25, 2022](#)
- [15, 17 EPA.gov SELC Supplement to Complaint 05RNO-21-R4 December 22, 2022](#)
- [16 NC News Online January 14, 2022](#)