

CAFO Fact Sheet

What exactly is a CAFO?

The word “CAFO” has a bad rap. Why? The Internet enables the spread of misinformation about CAFOs, celebrities, politicians and just about everyone or everything in the public eye.

CAFO is an acronym created by the government to stand for a Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation. CAFOs are regulated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and must obtain a permit to regulate the discharge of pollutants from point sources (on the farm) to waters of the U.S. This is just one example of the regulations in place to protect our water. CAFOs – or large farms – follow strict government regulations or they are penalized.

Don't CAFOs produce a lot of manure?

The careful planning and approval process is meant to safeguard the environment. A CAFO's size allows the owner to invest in technology to further protect the environment that smaller farms may not be able to afford.

When a CAFO spreads manure on fields it must be done in accordance with a detailed nutrient management plan, which is designed to optimize the use of nutrients, prevent overspreading and protect our water quality. The requirements for CAFOs are outlined in Chapter NR 243 of the Wisconsin Administrative Code. Here are a few other requirements of CAFOs. Owners must:

- Store their manure in secure structures, called a lagoon, until it's legal to spread it on their land as fertilizer to grow their crops.
- Collect rainwater and other water used on their farm and store it in their lagoon until they can recycle it.
- Submit thousands of pages of documentation about where and when they spread their manure.
- Receive regular inspections from governmental agencies.

Why do we have CAFOs?

We must better understand the two challenges we face:

- **Every year, the number of farms in America drops.** This is no surprise given the average age of the American farmer is steadily increasing. The national trend of fewer, but larger farms has played out here in Wisconsin as it has throughout the country. There are less than half as many farms as there were in Wisconsin in 1952. During the same period of time, our state population has grown by 68 percent.
- **Family farms, which still account for 97 percent of all farms nationwide, including CAFOs, have also become larger, because the number of family members these farms support has grown.** A family farm no longer just means a married couple and their children. Often, a family farm supports multiple generations of the same family. Siblings, cousins and grandparents have pooled their resources, and the result is larger farms. It's similar to expanding the size of a local hardware store because the owner's children wanted to join the business.

Think about the small mom-and-pop grocery store. Now, we have Whole Foods, Festival Foods and others. Big isn't bad. Big businesses employ people, contribute to the economy and offer more choices. Like other businesses that have consolidated and become larger, CAFOs are simply farms that have become larger.



Why can't all farms stay small?

Farming is a business with long hours, large investments in equipment and land, and little to no vacation time. Thus, there are fewer farms and farmers.

At the same time, the global population and global demand for food continues to grow. Wisconsin's population growth since the middle of the 20th century has been outpaced by growth nationwide. The United States population has more than doubled since 1950. Additionally, our population is increasingly urban. Eighty-one percent of Americans live in cities or suburban areas. This is a much higher proportion than the global average. The United States is also the only major industrialized nation that is expected to experience significant population growth in the future. This growth coupled with ever-increasing urbanization means that the domestic demand for agricultural products will experience robust growth going forward. Therefore, agricultural productivity must be increased even while the number of farms decreases.

By 2050, the population is expected to easily exceed 9 billion. This population boom is also accompanied by increasing global prosperity. It is estimated that 3 billion people will join the middle class by 2050. This will increase demand for meat, milk, and eggs by 60 percent. The only way that this demand can possibly be met is by producing more agricultural products with fewer resources. CAFOs provide us the only realistic opportunity to do just that.



Do cows on CAFOs receive the same care as cows on smaller farms?

CAFO might also stand for a Comfortable Animal Farming Oasis. The cows on CAFOs usually lie on sand bedding, have fans and/or misters blowing on them on hot, humid days, are free to roam the barn and socialize, and are free to eat and drink 24/7. It's a good life for a cow. Farmers are passionate about their animals and spend their entire day making sure the cows are comfortable.

Don't CAFOs put other farms out of business?

Imagine if you owned a farm, were 70 years old and your children did not want to farm (it's hard work). What would you do with your buildings and your land? If a neighbor farmer had two children who wanted to come back to the farm, the neighbor could purchase your land and you might stay in your house. This way you would have retirement income and the neighbor's children could come "back home to farm" and earn a living. The neighbor farmer may have to expand the size of the barn and purchase more cows to produce enough milk to provide salaries for everyone. Your neighbor might become a CAFO - is this a bad thing?

CAFO-sized farms allow more family members to stay actively involved in agriculture. And, family members who return to the farm continue our state's rich dairy heritage.

