

# The Heartland Spirit

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## Silk Purses or Silver Linings?

### *Profitable Alternative Hog Farming Methods Can Spare the Environment*

by Nancy Pfoutz | Staff Writer

*Final article in a three part series on hog farming in Iowa*

Whether your closest exposure to pigs has been from the movie *Babe* or daily chores on a farm, or if the last time pork graced your table was last night's dinner or at your grandmother's in the '80s, if you live in Iowa, pigs have a big influence on your life... probably bigger than you know.

A major contributor to the state's economy, hog farming is a \$12 billion industry in Iowa, making it the number one pork producer in the US. Hog farming employs 65,000 people, either directly or indirectly, generates \$2 billion in person income, and contributes \$3 billion in revenues to the Iowa state budget yearly, according to 2002 figures. In Jefferson County alone, hog farming is a \$45 million industry, employing over 250 people.

Methods of hog production have changed dramatically in the last 20 years with smaller numbers of farmers producing many more hogs, often in contract arrangements with large agricultural corporations. These large farms can house thousands of hogs in Confined Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) facilities in which animals are packed tightly together, generating concentrated amounts of waste, which is then stored in underground lagoons, later to be applied as crop fertilizer.

Though some see this as an efficient way to create volume and increase profits, many environmental advocates say hi-tech farming has serious environmental consequences and human health risks. Jefferson County is present-

ly home to a small number of CAFO's, but many see signs that that number is poised to grow.

Groups of family farmers and citizens concerned about the impact of large-scale agribusiness are seeking alterna-



tives, and several viable options exist for those who approach the industry with creativity and good business sense.

Opportunities include co-operative partnership arrangements, contracting with natural producers, organic hog farming, and farm product diversification. There are also significant ways for a community to steer the direction of hog farming and support the maintenance of traditional farming, through consumer choices and political action.

### **Returning Pigs to the Pasture**

One profitable method is to raise hogs for a natural livestock producer, such as Niman Ranch, which is committed to natural, humane and sustainable practices.

Independent farmers who produce for Niman Ranch, such as State Representative John Whitaker, free-range their hogs in pastures or raise them in hoop barns with deep bedding systems that use corn stalks

and hay. Hoop barns are open on one side, and the waste is composted and aerated before being applied as surface fertilizer about once a year. No antibiotics are used. The hogs, only about 150 to a building, as compared to hundreds or thousands in CAFOs, have room to move around, and farrowing hogs have easy access to the outdoors instead of being crated.

Phi Kramer of Niman Ranch's division in Thornton Iowa, says, "Our average producer raises 500 pigs a year. Environmentally, we've had no complaints about odor or human health problems caused by our farms. There's minimal ammonia because of the bedding system."

Niman Ranch farmers are seeing profits, too. "We pay a set floor price, and when the market is above that, we pay more," said Kramer. "There's room for growth here. We harvest 2,000 – 2,500 per week and could grow to 3,000 – 4000 per week." Ron Snakenberg, an independent farmer whose two sons work with him, said, "If it weren't for Niman Ranch I wouldn't be in the business."

### **Organizing to Go Organic**

Another option for the family farmer is to farm organically, utilizing the National Organic Standards to produce a certified specialty product. After 27 years of hog farming, Tom Frantzen of New Hampton began producing pork for Organic Valley in 1999 and is enjoying both the sustainable practices and the profits.

"One challenge is that you can't push or intensify production with organic farming. It just won't work. You don't have standard crutches to fall back on, like medications. But we're actually reducing the number of sows and increasing the number of pigs in the market." As to profits, "This is the

largest inventory of hogs I've ever had," he said. "Organic Valley pays a stable, negotiated price."

With organic farming, Frantzen finds that not only does composting waste products eliminate the possibility of manure leaks and spills, it enhances the soil. When the nutrient flow on his farm was analyzed, it came back in good balance. "[Negative] environmental impact is almost nil on this farm," he added.

While factory farms can produce more volume at a quicker rate, organic models are more sustainable for the long term. Michael Levine, President of the Organic Meat Company at Organic Valley, commented, "We're in this for the long haul. In the organic system everyone and everything benefits – the farmer, the hog, consumers, and the earth."

## The "Get Big or Get Out" Fallacy

The traditional farmer is frequently told by agribusiness to either "get big or get out", says Gene Bauston of Farm Sanctuary, an organization promoting humane treatment of farm animals. "But there are growing opportunities for people who want to do it differently." He says localized small farm cooperatives, or regional coops are alternative opportunities for farmers.

Steve Burgmeier, a Fairfield hog farmer, partnered with four other farmers to increase production volume. "Because five of us pooled together, we've succeeded, where all of us might have failed on our own." He also joined with 123 farmers to open their own processing plant this past November.

## More Diversity, More Marketing, More Options

Another strategic tactic is direct marketing. "Farmers can do direct marketing, to neighbors, relatives, local Farmers' Markets," suggested Robert Karp of Practical Farmers of Iowa, which helps farmers connect with other farmers to share business solutions. "I'd encourage a new farmer to take a business class, plan carefully, and learn directly from other farmers. You have to understand your own goals to make it as a small farmer."

Diversifying, having three or four income-producing enterprises stemming from the same farm, is also a practical way to protect against a fluctuating hog market. In addition, it creates a natural cycle of maximizing resources: growing your own crop of corn takes care of feed for the livestock, normally a large expense. Whitaker thinks diversification is a way to get young people involved in agriculture again. Kramer of Niman Ranch agrees, suggesting combining hogs with cattle and row crop production of corn, soybean, oats and hay, for example.

## Local Citizens Getting Active

The general public can play a major role in shifting hog farming in a particular direction. Action can steps be taken to redefine the nature of the industry so that it's harder for corporate farming to dominate and more conducive for traditional family farmers to survive.

Kari Carney, Senior Community Organizer with Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement (ICCI) says her organization has stopped nearly three dozen large-scale facilities from being built and forced state officials to issue violations against polluters. She suggested contacting members of the Environmental Protection Commission (EPC), who oversee the DRN hog factories in Jefferson County.

Francis Thicke, a Fairfield organic dairy farmer, is a member of the EPC. He advises political pressure to reduce negative effects of factory farms. "In my opinion, [we need] legislation to allow for local control of CAFOs. The EPC and DNR are limited by law...it will take a lot of heat on our legislators, to match the heat they get from agricultural special interests."

He suggests contacting Representative John Whitaker and Senator David Miller to see where they stand on local control. State Representative Sandy Greiner is a strong advocate for special interests and has sponsored legislation to bypass DNR and EPC efforts to set air quality standards for CAFOs, says Thicke.

Some look to models in other parts of the country. Rural farm communities in Pennsylvania, for example, have taken the local control sentiment to heart and successfully used political action to

reframe the factory farm issue as a battle between corporate interest and the rights of local citizens.

With the help of Pennsylvania attorney Tom Lindsey, 300 municipal governments have worked for six years to reject the CAFOs and waste that were threatening to move into their towns. Grassroots efforts built enough support to pass statewide laws and constitutional amendments that ban corporate agribusiness from owning or controlling farms in their areas.

"Realizing that regulation of hog farms wasn't enough, they decided to eliminate factory farming altogether," Lindsey said.

## Making Changes in Jefferson County

In Iowa, advocates of environmental change say steps must begin at the state level. Fairfield attorney Tom Makeig, who is currently representing Jeanette Lacey in her legal action to stop a CAFO from being built adjacent to her property, commented, "The state legislature has pre-empted local control. It's important to engage in citizen lobbying to correct the imbalance of power and influence that large agribusiness interests have purchased through lucrative campaign contributions over a long period of time.

"Family farmer awareness has to be strengthened – their interests are not being represented by the Farm Bureau [a national farming association], in spite of the rhetoric," he said.

Patrick Bosold of the Leopold Group, the local chapter of the Sierra Club, agrees. "Ultimately, it points back to the state legislature," he said. "Unfortunately, approximately 40% of its members belong to the Farm Bureau, which has been very supportive of large agribusinesses."

Citizen action can take many forms. The ICCI suggests developing a community-wide priority to not sell land to hog factories or take their waste products, to not give them tax breaks, and to ask county supervisors to pass local health ordinances. ICCI advocates holding state legislators accountable by demanding local control, tougher permit requirements and clean air stan-

dards, and a statewide moratorium on factory farming construction.

A new approach to hog farming involves a multi-pronged strategy. It begins with educating farmers and the community about options and consequences and continues with providing consulting and financial support to new family farmers or those in transition. This strategy needs to include political pressure and legislative steps. Residents need to become more vocal and willing to do grassroots organizing. Consumers need to be willing to choose alternate sources of pork.

Groups of people can effectively change trends, one step at a time. With many in Jefferson County committed to its economic viability, healthy living and a clean environment, the community has the ability to influence the future direction of hog farming.