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The Perils of Industrial Pig Farming

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The perils of industrial pig farming

OUR SYMPATHY goes out to the people of North Carolina who have lost family members and property in the wake of the flooding caused by Hurricane Floyd. The awesome forces of nature will keep us all humble amid such natural catastrophes. Because of sensible crisis management, evacuation and zoning legislation, the loss in human lives was happily low.

However, part of the disaster could have been avoided or ameliorated if only prudent policies had been enacted and enforced. Apart from the main headlines are accounts of some 2.4 million dead chickens, 500,000 dead turkeys and some 100,000 dead pigs floating about in the floodplains and estuaries. The losses in livestock and pets are a nightmare come true.

North Carolina is one the nation's several major meat-producing states. Why should we be much concerned about the lives of animals that were being raised for slaughter in the massive food industry? In fact, there is very much more at stake.

If the warnings of two recent books had been heeded, perhaps much of this massive problem could have been avoided. The volumes entitled *Pigs, Profits, and Rural Communities*, edited by K.M. Thu and E.P. Durrenberger, and *Hog Ties*, by R.P. Horowitz, had been crying out for attention before it was too late. It is now too late. The real culprit in this case was not Floyd but the vertically integrated swine industry and its allies in the North Carolina legislature who shunned the introduction of sensible laws and avoided serious regulation of the pig business since some are directly benefiting from its high-profit return. The two unsung works above may be akin to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and should not be casually dismissed as a hysterical assembly of very green environmentalists or vegetarians.

No, their well-reasoned documentation throws down a grave challenge to America. Especially, they challenge the massive desire for pig flesh that is met by the meat-packing industry and the pig business. This is where North Carolina now comes under sharp accusation.

The pioneering studies by anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt documenting the ethnography of the pig farm in the 1940s raised a cry of alarm about the potential loss of a basic element of American culture with the urbanization of rural life. What Goldschmidt was anxious about is already at hand in North Carolina. Ominous warnings were raised about the impending disaster, but now that Hurricane Floyd has savagely struck this state, the scenario is a textbook case of an environmental catastrophe. These books call for a national debate about traditional small-scale labor-intensive pig farmers versus those engaged in industrial, supposedly efficient, capital-intensive swine production. In this production, "hidden" costs are obscured and promised profits to producers do not materialize.

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According to Thu and Durrenberger, industrial pig production generates many collective costs to rural communities, while corporate power groups seek to immunize themselves with high profit models of agricultural efficiency. The cost-benefit approach rarely takes account of cultural, health, political and environmental costs. And, in fact, many pig farmers have already fallen victim to the collapse in pig prices.

Especially shocking are the poor environmental quality, hazardous conditions, infections, contaminants, and toxic substances common in pig farming. The industrial approach is hardly a sustainable model of raising pigs and the work intensity only will aggravate the situation.

There are intriguing research results showing unanticipated negative effects in the psychological

of a city of 100,000 without a sewer system? Pigs live there already.

Piggy politics in North Carolina were a major concern for former North Carolina Atty. Gen. Robert Morgan. When the stinking waters finally subside as they did in the 1995 lagoon flood, there will be a new stink in the North Carolina State House. The path taken earlier by the mass poultry industry was predictive of the present disaster in swine production.

The economic loss to farmers who will bear the brunt of the burden will not only be tallied in rotting animals that cannot be buried until water drains away. But now the nauseating "lagoons" for pig feces and urine are fully dispersed into multiple watersheds so that drinking water supplies and sewer systems are totally compromised. Even pig manure that might have recently reached pasturage and farmland is washed into creeks and rivers.

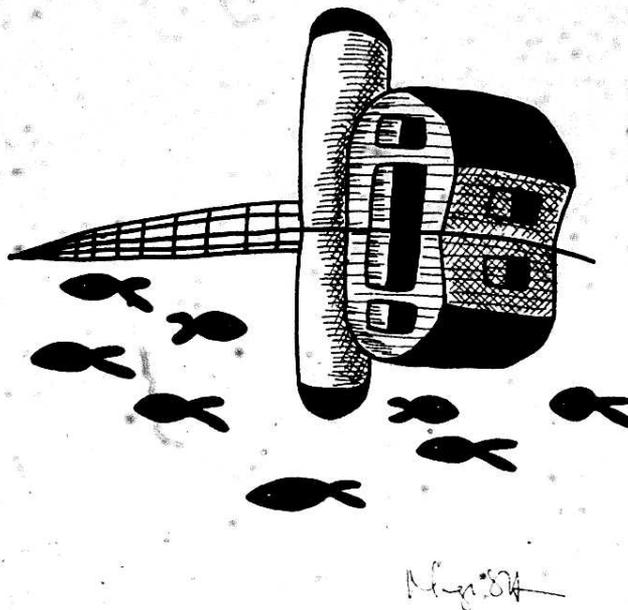
Most alarming of all is that this had all been predicted and anticipated as an outcome of industrial pig production that was virtually unchecked by legislation while it was already destroying the economic and social lives of small producers on family farms. To a great extent, rural America still has the soul of our nation, but this is now at great risk. Estimates are that this disaster will permanently eliminate 15 percent of these vulnerable North Carolina farmers.

This recent event dramatically underscores the urgent need to avoid the disasters sure to happen if the same neglect of the environment and political indifference persists. Legislators in pig-producing states, including Rhode Island, must think and act now to avoid vulnerable bottomland and floodplain siting of industrial pig farms. Similarly, pig farms must provide effective and rapid waste treatment and disposal that does not threaten riverine contamination and E. coli corruption of the water supply system for humans.

A national debate needs to formulate rational alternatives to the many issues raised within the framework of sustainable agriculture for rural development along with swine factory farming. The empowerment of local networks of pig farmers must occur to recover their political voice from being consumed by remote corporations. Without this, the precipitous decline of pig prices will have few producers left even at farm factories. The alternatives will give us all much-needed food for thought.

See: Richard P. Horowitz, 1998, *Hog Ties: Pigs, Manure and Mortality in American Culture*, St. Martin's Press: New York; and Kendall M. Thu and E. Paul Durrenberger (eds.), 1998, *Pigs, Profits, and Rural Communities*, State University of New York Press, Albany.

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health of workers in the pig business. Clinical depression from prolonged exposure to horrible odors was but one major problem. Clean air legislation has not begun to address this.

Laura Jackson's work presented in the Thu and Durrenberger volume exposes the relationship between large-scale swine production and water quality. As bad as she thought this might be, the case of North Carolina was immeasurably worse. Probably she is thinking, "I told you so," but that must be little satisfaction. The 1995 pollution involving the 19-mile "lagoon" spill of the New River is nothing compared with what we have just witnessed. Her work needs to be required reading for the next legislative sessions in North Carolina, Michigan and Iowa at least.

When some legislators are invested in this business or are in the pockets of those who are, there can be no serious regulation of the prodigious issue of waste treatment. Could one imagine