

# What is a CAFO?

## Introduction

A CAFO, or Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation, is an industrial scale, livestock operation. A CAFO is where animals are confined at least 45 days or more per year in an area without vegetation, in contrast to life in a pasture setting. The animals in CAFOs are most often beef cattle, dairy cows, hogs, or poultry. CAFO industrial complexes are where you, and all Americans, get your meat, dairy products and eggs if you shop at a typical grocery store.

CAFOs include open feedlots, as well as massive, windowless buildings where livestock are confined in crowded pens, cages or stalls. The animals do not graze or forage or consume a natural diet. Instead, feed (usually corn or soy) is brought to the animals. CAFO animals live, sleep, and eat where they urinate and defecate. Crowded and stressful conditions predispose animals to disease and death. A CAFO can house anywhere from hundreds to millions of animals.

- In Kansas a cattle feedlot is permitted for 140,000 cows and a dairy for 35,000 cows. Another confines 198,000 mature hogs just a few miles from one holding 132,000 hogs;<sup>1</sup>
- In Iowa an egg factory complex confines 5.0 million laying hens;<sup>2</sup>
- From 2005 to 2018 CAFOs increased from 545 to 775 in the Maumee watershed that flows into Lake Erie at Toledo, Ohio contributing to toxic algae blooms that imperil the city's water supply.<sup>3</sup>

Large, high density CAFOs have reduced the number of livestock farmers in the US by 80%<sup>4</sup> Other terms used to describe a CAFO are mega farm, animal factory, factory farm, hog motels, poop factories or animal concentration camps. The quantity of urine and feces from the smallest hog CAFO (2,500 animals) is equivalent to the urine and feces produced by 10,000 humans.<sup>5</sup> Unlike animals in pasture, manure from CAFOs is often collected and stored in liquid form that creates serious problems with proper disposal.



Source: Google Earth

Seen from the air: 140,000 cattle in a Grant Co., Ks. feedlot. Cows are packed into long rectangular pens where rain washes manure over the ground to holding basins along the edges (dark figures).



Source: Google Earth

198,000 hogs, 5000 per barn, served by pipes that transfer wastewater to 20-foot deep storage ponds called lagoons (dark squares). In Greeley County, Kansas.

## CAFO (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation)

CAFO is a commonly used acronym for a concentrated animal feeding operation, originally defined by the USEPA and used by the states that have delegated authority to enforce the Clean Water Act. Its use may vary according to state laws, but in general, refers to confined livestock operations that exceed a certain threshold in animal population. Operations smaller than this threshold are referred to as animal feeding operations or AFOs, but may be defined as CAFOs under state law under certain circumstances.

A CAFO confines as many as, or more than the numbers of animals specified in any of the following, more common, categories<sup>6</sup>

- 700 mature dairy cows, whether milked or dry
- 1,000 cattle (other than mature dairy cows or veal calves), including heifers, steers, bulls, and cow/calf pairs
- 2,500 swine, each weighs 55 pounds or more
- 10,000 swine, each weighs less than 55 pounds
- 55,000 turkeys
- 30,000 laying hens or broilers, if the AFO uses a liquid manure handling system
- 125,000 chickens (other than laying hens), if the AFO doesn't use a liquid manure handling system
- 82,000 laying hens, if the AFO doesn't use a liquid manure handling system
- 30,000 ducks, if the AFO doesn't use a liquid manure handling system
- 5,000 ducks, if the AFO uses a liquid manure handling system

The USEPA also coined the term *animal unit* designed to roughly correspond to the amount of manure produced by a species of livestock. An animal unit is calculated by dividing 1000 by the above threshold animal populations. For example, hogs weighing 55 lb. or more are considered 0.4 animal units each, calculated by dividing 1000 by 2500. Thus, a CAFO is also defined as 1000 or more animal units. States may set certain requirements for the location of CAFOs according to their size in animal units, which is a (very rough) surrogate for the potential for pollution and odor. For example, a state may require a minimum separation distance to surface water or to neighboring homes according to total animal units.

States may also set their own animal unit values. For example, Kansas recently assigned a lower value of 0.003 animal units per broiler chicken to encourage production in the state. This meant a new producer could permit some 330,000 chickens at a single location without qualifying as a CAFO, thereby enjoying much weaker standards for its separation from neighbors.

### Why are CAFOs cause for our concern?

- CAFOs are responsible for multiple and significant well-documented public health and environmental harms. They threaten the air we breathe, the water we drink and recreate in, soil health, and biodiversity.
- Rural communities suffer socioeconomic losses and environmental injustice.
- Current regulations and laws do not adequately protect the environment and public health.
- CAFOs receive substantial taxpayer support.
- Generally, there are no CAFO size or density restrictions within communities, even those located within watersheds already impaired by agricultural pollution. CAFO expansions and new constructions amplify the associated harms. "Right to Farm" laws leave CAFO neighbors and their communities with little to no say.

Also [read more on this website](#) to learn about CAFOs and how you can help fight them and reform our country's farm and food system.

## References

1. Kansas Department of Health & Environment, CAFO Permit List, Jun. 2020.
2. The Guardian, April 28, 2022, Culling of 5.3 million hens due to avian flu.  
[https://www.theguardian.com/science/2022/apr/28/egg-factory-avian-flu-chickens-culled-workers-fired-iowa?CMP=oth\\_b-aplnews\\_d-1](https://www.theguardian.com/science/2022/apr/28/egg-factory-avian-flu-chickens-culled-workers-fired-iowa?CMP=oth_b-aplnews_d-1)
3. Environmental Working Group, [https://www.ewg.org/interactive-maps/2019\\_maumee/](https://www.ewg.org/interactive-maps/2019_maumee/)
4. USEPA, Literature Review of Contaminants in Livestock and Poultry Manure and Implications for Water Quality, July, 2013.
5. The Food Print of Pork, Grace Communications foundation, August, 2020, p.16.  
<https://foodprint.org/reports/the-foodprint-of-pork/>
6. USEPA, NPDES Permit Writers' Manual for CAFOs, Chapter 2, p.2-6