To: Legislative Study Committee, CAFO/Factory Farm Impacts; Indiana Senate  
From: Stephen Obermeier  
Subject: My written testimonial in regard to CAFO issues  

September 12, 2107

By this letter I wish to provide input to the public hearing on September 19, 2107, at which the public can present testimony to the committee of the Indiana Senate noted above. I live in a rural area in southernmost Indiana, and since my retirement as a researcher at the US Geological Survey have spent much time in study of CAFO/factory farm-related issues, especially in Indiana. I have also been in contact with physicians and top-level researchers in the health industry, and have a number of concerns in regard to human health. (Hereafter, I refer to all large confined feeding operations as CAFOs.)

The CAFO industry typically denies that there are associated serious health problems, or states there are no health problems that are not readily controllable by the CAFO operators and the state regulators. The Purdue Ag Extension office basically agrees with this position, as per their online publications (as an example, enclosed is the report titled CAFOs and Public Health: Odor and its Possible Health Effects, by Paul Ebner, report no. ID-361). I note that this and other Purdue reports dealing with CAFOs have had no input from medical professionals. Moreover, positions in the Purdue reports are commonly in opposition with prestigious health professionals. I think the Purdue reports are exercises in equivocation and denial, and they typically recommend that CAFO operators “follow recommended practices”—and that should suffice to control health problems. But, that recommendation does not comply with the real world in Indiana. Unfortunately, the State of Indiana has no limits on airborne emissions, and everyone in a county could be killed from CAFO emissions yet no regulations be broken.

I have also enclosed the executive summary of a report done at the request of the governor of Iowa, released in 2002, which attests that even 15 years ago the health hazards from airborne emissions of CAFOs were well known and acknowledged by agriculture experts (at Iowa State University) and health experts (at the University of Iowa). Those experts recommended to the governor that limits be placed on airborne emissions from CAFOs.

More recent reports discussing the health hazards are available from health institutions such as CDC and Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. And the former head of the Indiana University School of Public Health, Dr. Stephen Jay, has asserted for many years in meetings and public hearings that the (huge) usage of antibiotics in CAFOs is adversely impacting the effectiveness of antibiotics in humans. Yet for years the Purdue reports denied any impact.

The reason I am bring up the matter of bias in the Purdue reports is because it is my first-hand experience that many politicians, such as county commissioners and council members, and very likely state-level politicians such as those on this committee, frequently are swayed by those reports.

In summary, I believe that in order for your hearings to be viewed as legitimate, and for you to come up with required practices for CAFOs, you must have major input from persons having certifiable and widely acknowledged medical expertise.

In regard to expertise, I have seen the oral presentation to your committee by Dr. Carolyn Orr in which she says that “Surface waters and odors and flies wasn’t any better when everybody has 20 sows and 15 cows in their backyard.” I am 78 years old and was raised on a small farm with
perhaps 30-40 hogs and 15 head of cattle, and our “cash crop” was tobacco. That was the norm for farms then, in this area. Yes, the manure stunk when we cleaned the barn, but the stink only extended over a small area rather than enveloping an area miles in extent. And the stink from a CAFO is different and often godawful.

No, I am not pining for a return to the life on the small farm of my boyhood, because it was a very hard life. But now, life with CAFOs around is living with an out-of-control industry.

By the way, I have a PhD in civil engineering from Purdue and am proud of it.

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