

FOR RELEASE WEDNESDAY, NOV. 19, 2008

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Permitting Pigs Report Suggests Ways to Repair CAFO Approval Process

IOWA CITY, Iowa (Nov. 19, 2008) – Iowa’s water quality is poor and repairing problems with animal confinement permit regulations provide an important first step toward its improvement.

A new report from the nonpartisan Iowa Policy Project (IPP) addresses deficiencies in the permitting process for concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFOs, long a point of contention between the agriculture industry and environmental advocates.

“We can get on a path toward cleaner water by making changes to the current permit process for CAFOs,” said Teresa Galluzzo, IPP research associate and an author of the report, “Permitting Pigs: Fixing Faults in Iowa’s CAFO Approval Process.” “We’ve used the current permitting process for six years and it isn’t working. It isn’t providing enough protection for our water.”

David Osterberg, report author and executive director of the IPP, said deficiencies in the current process are illustrated by a recent Dallas County case, which left confusion about the authority of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and its governing Environmental Protection Commission to review permit decisions while bringing fresh attention to the role of local officials in CAFO permit decisions.

“In Dallas County, we saw that the CAFO permit process allowed little water-quality protection from the spreading of manure near the already impaired Raccoon River, which provides water for Iowa’s largest drinking-water system,” Osterberg said. “New state permitting standards should be designed to consider a watershed’s impaired status, whether a proposed CAFO is near drinking-water sources and how many CAFOs a given watershed can handle.”

The report makes several recommendations, including:

- Pass stronger minimum requirements for the approval of new construction permits and manure management plans.
- Codify in state law that the DNR director has authority to review a decision, while maintaining livestock producers’ rights of appeal.
- Improve and require all counties to adopt the Master Matrix, which governs CAFO permit decisions. Compensate counties for their administration efforts.
- Require expanded permitting, to include smaller CAFOs. Currently, only manure-management plans are required for facilities with 500-to-999 animal units; construction permits and use of the Master Matrix also should be required for facilities with 500 or more animal units, providing a more accurate picture of the number and size of CAFOs in a watershed.
- Allow counties to adopt rules for CAFOs to protect water and air quality, public health and community well-being.

The Iowa Policy Project (IPP) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit policy research and analysis organization. IPP reports on environmental and energy policy, job and economic opportunity trends, and budget and tax issues, are available at www.iowapolicyproject.org.