

Government Report Links Factory Farms to Harmful Air Emissions, Water Pollution

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Government Report Links Factory
Farms to Harmful Air Emissions, Water Pollution
Lawmakers Question EPA Plan to Loosen Air And Water Reporting Requirements

Washington, D.C.
– A Government Accountability Office (GAO) study released today says that large factory farms, known as Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), can emit dangerous levels of airborne and waterborne pollutants. The report concludes that these operations can potentially degrade air quality because large amounts of manure may emit unsafe quantities of ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, and particulate matter, and they can potentially degrade water quality because pollutants in manure such as nitrogen, phosphorus, bacteria, and organic matter could enter nearby water bodies.

Both
the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry have determined that exposure to ammonia and hydrogen sulfide can have harmful health effects, even resulting in death at high concentrations.

The results
of the 18-month GAO study come as key Members of Congress are challenging a controversial proposal by EPA that would lift release reporting requirements of airborne pollutants from CAFOs, despite the

fact that EPA's own scientists have found hydrogen sulfide and ammonia to be powerful pollutants with potentially serious health effects. Further, despite clear evidence of the link between animal feeding operations and impaired water quality, EPA is on the verge of approving a new Agency rulemaking that restricts Federal authority under the Clean Water Act to only the most egregious polluters to the nation's waters — those facilities with chronic ongoing discharges of animal waste runoff into rivers, streams, and lakes.

Today's

GAO report was requested by Reps. John D. Dingell (D-MI), the Chairman of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, James L. Oberstar (D-MN), the Chairman of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Gene Green (D-TX), the Chairman of the Environment and Hazardous Materials Subcommittee, Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX), the Chairwoman of the Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee, and Hilda Solis (D-CA), the Vice Chair of the Environment and Hazardous Subcommittee. In March, Dingell and other Energy and Commerce Committee members wrote EPA questioning the agency's proposal to eliminate reporting requirements for significant air emissions from animal waste.

"This

GAO study confirms that the Bush Administration's plan to exempt industrial sized animal feeding operations from emissions reporting requirements is nothing more than a favor to Big Agribusiness at the expense of the public health and communities living near these facilities," said Rep. Dingell.

"It is clear that the

clustering of agricultural operations increases the probability of pollutants from animal waste degrading water quality and leading to serious health concerns for area residents. If not managed properly by the CAFOs, E coli and other pathogens found in animal manure can contaminate fresh drinking water supplies," said Rep. Oberstar. "Despite 35 years of Clean Water Act authority to address pollution from CAFOs, I am troubled that EPA simply does not have a sufficient understanding of the scope of the problems, let alone a comprehensive solution to protect the nation's waters from potential contaminants. This is a recipe for serious impairment of the nation's water supplies from known and controllable sources."

"The EPA's own

science demonstrates that animal waste can cause health problems, and this report found that the EPA lacks accurate data on large animal feeding operations," Rep. Green said. "As a result, we are highly skeptical of the Administration's proposal to exempt them from reporting hazardous releases."

"We realize that the livestock and poultry industry is vital to our nation's economy, and

that animal manure can be used beneficially on farms to fertilize crops and restore nutrients to soil, but we also know that if improperly managed manure and wastewater from animal feeding operations can adversely impact water quality through surface runoff and erosion, direct discharges to surface water, spills and other dry-weather discharges and leaching into the soil and groundwater." said Rep. Johnson. "We must guard against this."

"This report makes it clear that the EPA has failed to assess the extent to which pollutants linked to animal waste may be impairing human health and the environment," said Rep. Solis. "The EPA's proposal to exempt industrial sized animal feeding operations from emissions reporting requirements is not only irresponsible but also careless and neglectful."

The GAO report made the following findings:

- Some operations generate more raw waste than U.S. cities produce annually. For example, a beef cattle farm with 140,000 head of cattle could produce over 1.6 million tons of manure annually, more than the almost 1.4 million tons of waste generated by more than two million residents of Houston, Texas.

- The number of CAFOs increased by about 230 percent over the past 20 years from about 3,600 in 1982 to almost 12,000 in 2002. The number of animals raised on large farms also increased from more than 257 million in 1982 to over 890 million in 2002, an increase of 246 percent.

- EPA has not yet assessed the extent to which air and water pollution from CAFOs may be impairing human health and the environment because it lacks key data on the amount of pollutants that CAFOs are discharging. At least 15 studies have directly linked air and water pollutants from animal waste to specific health or environmental impacts and 12 other studies have made indirect linkages between pollutants from animal waste and health and environmental impacts.

- EPA has neither the information it needs to assess the extent to which CAFOs may be contributing to water pollution, nor the information it needs to ensure compliance with the Clean Water Act. The EPA lacks reliable, comprehensive data on the number, location and size of CAFO operations that have been issued permits and the amount of discharges they release.

- EPA does not have the information it needs to effectively regulate CAFOs.

- EPA may be less likely to seek enforcement against a CAFO that it believes is discharging pollutants into a water body because it is now more difficult to prove that the water body is federally regulated. The GAO found that a 2006 Supreme Court decision regarding the jurisdiction of the Clean Water Act has also complicated EPA's enforcement of CAFO regulations. Further, GAO noted that EPA's Assistant Administrator for Enforcement and Compliance Assurance stated in a memorandum that the "Rapanos decision and EPA's guidance has resulted in significant adverse impacts to the clean water enforcement

program.”;

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questioned EPA’s proposed rule to exempt animal feeding operations from reporting emissions of ammonia and hydrogen sulfide above 100 pounds per day because EPA “has not yet completed its data collection effort and does not yet know the extent to which animal feeding operations are emitting these pollutants.” The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) and the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act (EPCRA) reporting requirements provide government authorities, emergency management agencies, and citizens with information about the source and magnitude of hazardous releases into the environment.

On

September 24th, the Committee on Energy and Commerce’s Environment and Hazardous Materials Subcommittee will hold a hearing on CAFOs and the EPA’s proposal to eliminate air emission reporting requirements under CERCLA and EPCRA for animal feeding operations. Representatives from the GAO and the EPA are among those scheduled to testify.

The GAO report is available at: www.gao.gov

The March letter to EPA is available at: http://energycommerce.house.gov/Press_110/110pr_environment.shtml#Letters

- 30 -

Prepared by the Committee on Energy and Commerce

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