

Factory Farming in Minnesota - Truth Revealed

On February 4, 2017, I attended a meeting entitled, "Factory Farming in Minnesota" held at Assisi Heights Spiritual Healing Center in Rochester, MN. My estimate of people in attendance was about 60-70. The majority of the people in the audience were retired seniors. I am going to guess about 15 farmers were also in attendance.

Who was on the panel?

The format of the meeting consisted of four panel speakers who each presented their designated topic. At the end of their presentations, audience members were asked to write questions down on a small piece of paper, which was then submitted to the moderator. Panel members were Sonja Trom Eayrs (lawyer and farmer's daughter), Colleen Carpenter (Theology, St. Catherine University), Jeff Johnson (Philosophy, St. Catherine University), and Chris Peterson (pig farmer and SRAP associate). The moderator was Scott Walker of Cascade Meadow Wetlands and Environmental Science Center.

Who were the sponsors?

St. Mary's University of Minnesota, Cascade Meadows Wetlands and Environmental Science Center, MPIRG, Clean Water Action, Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, CAA, The Human Society of the United States, Birchwood Cafe, Environment Minnesota, SRAP, Dodge County Concerned Citizens, Change Food, Celeste's Dream Young Adult Spirituality, Earth Dance Farm, Minnesota Peacebuilding Leadership Institute, Justice Commission, Midwest Organic for Sustainable Education Service Moses, People's Food Coop, SFA.

Background

I am not going to go into great detail about the history of the Trom's history in Dodge County because from what I have been told, that alone could take an entire blog post. Here is the gist of the story - A young farmer built a 2400 head hog barn 1/2 mile from Sonja Trom's parents. (Sonja is originally from Dodge County but now lives in the twin cities where she is a lawyer.) The young farmer went through all the proper permits in building the hog barn and proceeded to build it. The Trom's (Sonja's parents) did not like it and sued Dodge County and the young farmer claiming water quality and odor nuisance. In fact, during the meeting, Sonja Trom claimed their dog vomits often due to the "factory farm stench." In the end, she feels that there are far too many factory farms that are causing environmental damage and she is willing to do what it takes to rid the state of them. She has gathered support from different organizations sympathetic to her cause.

Breakdown of the meeting . . .

The meeting room was surrounded by a number of sponsors information tables allowing people access to more information from their organizations along with signup for email updates. Sonja Trom Eayrs started the meeting with her presentation. She briefly talked about her parents, the lawsuits, the Dodge County concerned citizens, etc. and then proceeded to talk about the 11 feedlots within a three-mile radius of her parent's farms. She outlined how much water is used by factory farms, odor, and manure equivalency levels.

Propaganda and Fallacies Exposed

The first thing I noted--she never used the words "farmer," "family farms," or "hog barns." In fact, she continually used the word "industry" and "factory farm." In my opinion, this is intentional. By using these words, I believe she is trying to create a miserable vision in people's minds on how pigs are raised. She doesn't want people to think it's actually farmers that are taking care of those animals every. single. day.

Fallacy: She referred to how manure is waste that is spread on land and the fact that it is done at night probably so people don't know what is going on. **Truth:** Manure is and can be hauled all day long. There may be some farms that do more at night because they hire extra help during the fall (when it is spread) and much of that extra labor comes in after their daytime job. I know this happens where I live. There is an extraordinary amount of work during harvest and many farms (including ours) need extra labor. Another **truth** is manure is *valuable*. Soils are tested, manure is tested and then the appropriate amount is determined and [applied in a controlled manner](#) and used as next year's crop nutrients. [Manure is so valuable that it's on my financial balance sheet.](#)

Fallacy: She kept talking about vertical integration and how the pork industry is vertically integrated. The point of this statement is that factory farms are dictated and controlled by the meat packing industry (my interpretation). **Truth:** The definition of vertical integration is a strategy used by a company to gain control over its suppliers or distributors in order to increase the firm's power in the marketplace. The key word is *gain control over its suppliers*. On our farm, yes, we have a contract (a beginning and end date) with Hormel that outlines the pricing structure, the number of pigs we will sell, and when we will sell them. The key to this contract is that it is *our choice*. We don't have to sell to Hormel. We choose to. We can sell to anyone we choose. We like the contract because we need a market to sell our pigs and the contract is a good risk management tool.

But they don't control us.

Fallacy: Sonja kept bringing up specific factory farm buildings with curtains and how every day at about 6:00 p.m. the curtains drop and the stench rolls out of the buildings and is unbearable. **Truth:** Barns that use curtains also use controllers that control when the curtains go up and down. The controllers are based on temperatures and not times.

Theology - what our relationship is with God and animals

The next speaker was Colleen Carpenter who is an associate professor of Theology at St. Catherine University in Theology. Her emphasis is that we have a relationship with everything we touch and what it means to be a child of God. Personally, I feel bringing religion and spirituality into this meeting was not appropriate. Religion and spirituality is personal--it's between me, my church and God. I do not practice the same religion as St. Catherine University but still consider myself religious. I just happen to believe differently. And that should be respected.

Colleen showed three different slides to back up her position. Because I am not Catholic, much of this did not make sense to me. She emphasized three points from Laudato Si that she felt the Pope was giving a message about Mother Earth and how we need to interact with it. Again, out of my league.

During the question and answer session, she circled back to the fact that we may believe what we are doing is right with God but sometimes it takes other people to push us into looking at our beliefs and challenge ourselves as to whether they truly are right with God. I interpreted that as she was referring to those of us that raise pigs in barns and feel we are doing what is right with God in how we care for them, that we need to be challenged and pushed to rethink if that is truly right with God. Just wasn't appropriate in my opinion.

Food Ethics and Moral Cover . . .

Our third speaker was Jeff Johnson, a philosophy associate professor at St. Catherines University. He talked about food ethics. He started by showing us a picture of his cat (I think its name was Bubs). He continued with the idea that ALL animals should be treated like he treats his cat and there should be no difference between pets and livestock.

Mr. Johnson also talked about "moral cover" and the fact that we in agriculture use words and justifications for what we do on the farm but when you look at the underlying reasoning, its all about making money. That we are greedy and will do anything to make money, even at the expense of not treating animals right. (There is no logic to this belief.)

He showed a number of quotes from United States Farmers and Ranchers Alliance and Animal Ag Alliance as well as quotes from the American Veterinarian Medical Association and highlighted how those quotes are also used as "moral cover." For example, "factory farmers" talk about the use of gestation stalls and the benefits of feeding sows individually. The reasoning is so they receive the proper amount of feed and don't become too big or too small. He then talks about that is the "factory farmers" moral cover because the fact is if the sows are not in "proper condition" there will be a 5% hit on conception rate. Again -- he kept pushing that it's all about the mighty dollar.

Mr. Johnson also brought up the fact that gestation stalls are used to prevent sows from fighting

each other. Again, more "moral cover." He understood that sows will fight when in a group environment but if you allow them to fight, it will only last for 24 hours. So, having 24 hours of "skirmishes" is much better than four months of cruelty (housed in gestation stalls.) I guess he hasn't seen some of those "skirmishes" that ended up in death.

He proceeded to tell us that giving livestock grain to eat is wasting resources and that if we took the land that we use for livestock feed and planted it to high protein plants (soybeans and legumes) that we would be much better off. Tofu vs. Pork Chop? I know which one I prefer.

The bottom line is he has a completely different ideology. We are not raising pets. We are raising food animals. We know that we treat them with the utmost respect because they are giving the ultimate sacrifice. In regards to sow housing, there is no perfect way to house sows. Farmers and veterinarians alike agree on this. But what is more important than how they are housed is *how they are cared for*.

In regards to making a profit--yes, we do need to make a profit. We have bills to pay and food to put on our table. If we don't make a profit, [we are not sustainable](#). Period.

"A Real Farmer"

Our last presenter was Chris Peterson, a farmer from Iowa. He raises Berkshire hogs outside in Iowa. This is the first time we heard the word "farmer." The rest of us that raise pigs indoors are not farmers -- we are "industry." He told us his crusade is raising pigs "humanely" and a spiritual fight. He emphasized that 94% of individual pig farmers in Iowa are gone. 59% of individual cattle farmers are gone. Iowa still has about the same number of pigs in Iowa but far fewer farmers. He went on to say factory farming has become "collective farming" as in the way farming is in Communist countries. We "factory farmers" are turning into serfs and our wealth is being taken over.

He proceeded to spew the fact there are 9,000 factory farms in Iowa and they use "massive amount of antibiotics" and 82% are used for growth promotants (maybe he should look at FDA 209 and 213). "Iowa has turned into a toilet." He is blaming antibiotic resistance on factory farming. He said we will run out of antibiotics and IT WILL FAIL. Very emotional-packed talk. He also told us that he would not be able to raise pigs if he was not for his niche market. (Sells Berkshire pigs on Facebook).

And then water quality was brought up and the fact that we are exporting our good quality water through animal agriculture. Added to that is the fact that we factory farms waste a lot of water.

And the audience was eating it up . . .

I just have a real issue with Chris. Why are we villainizing fellow pig farmers? I would never stand

up in front of an audience and criticize the way Chris raises his pigs. Never. We need ALL pig farmers, no matter how the pigs are raised. There is room for all of us. What works for Chris may not work for us and vice versus. And that's okay.

And that's okay.

Question and Answer

The meeting ended with question and answer. Unfortunately, they screened the questions. I submitted two questions and neither was asked, even though the moderator said he basically asked all the questions that were submitted. I asked very simple questions such as "what is your definition of a factory farm?" and "can a factory farm be a family farm?" And based on other comments, other questions were not asked either. Sham.

Summary

Where do I start?

First, I drove two hours to attend this meeting. If I hadn't heard the things I did I probably wouldn't have believed it. I rolled my eyes and shook my head more times than I care to count. I did see a lot of clapping and head bobbing approvals. No question the presenters evoked emotion. It was definitely a propaganda piece. Too bad there could not have been a more balanced approach but that was not what they wanted.

Farmers are always looking for better ways to farm. We started farming nearly 40 years ago and how we care for our animals is much different today than when we started. And no question they are taken care of better now than before. And that will continue in the future. If you truly didn't care about animals, farmers would opt out of raising livestock without a second thought. It's hard work, takes many hours and is very risky. But at the end of the day, we are proud and humbled by providing food for ourselves and families.

I know farmers are tired of being told to tell their story, but here is a perfect example of why we need to do it. There are people that think we are evil and that we don't care. Just remember it doesn't take a lot of people to "move the needle." Just loud and elitist. We need to keep telling people what we do and why we do it.

Sonja and her "traveling show" will be in Mankato on February 23 from 6-7:30 in Ostrander Auditorium.

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