



Benefits for the Environment

Confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs, or “factory farms”) pack enormous numbers of animals into relatively small areas by confining egg-laying hens, breeding pigs, and veal calves in cages so restrictive they are rendered virtually immobile. This produces extremely concentrated amounts of waste that wreak havoc on the environment and public health in surrounding communities. Proposition 12 would help reduce some of the worst environmental impacts of CAFOs.

Pollution

On CAFOs, there’s simply too much waste for the land to absorb. Transporting waste to fields in need of fertilizer is expensive, so it’s often intentionally over-applied to nearby fields or stored in giant lagoons. These practices frequently emit noxious gases, harming rural communities.

Since there’s no requirement that the waste be treated before it’s applied or stored, pathogens and heavy metals in the fecal matter are of particular concern. In addition, enormous amounts of nitrogen and phosphorous from CAFOs leach into waterways and cause algal blooms. These blooms have decimated aquatic life in rivers and bays across the country.

The problems associated with excessive, concentrated animal waste are often most pronounced near operations that use cages or crates, which confine the maximum number of animals into a relatively small amount of space.

Climate change

Concentrated animal waste releases various greenhouse gases, including nitrous oxide and methane. In a landmark report, the United Nations concluded that animal agriculture is responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions than all forms of transportation combined.

Alternatives

In San Bernardino County, egg producer Hoover Ranch agreed to convert its caged-hen operation into a cage-free operation to alleviate some of the problems the facility caused for local residents, including intense odors and swarms of flies. An article in The Press Enterprise noted some of the benefits of converting: “In a cage-free environment, the chickens would live in the existing chicken houses, but on the ground instead of in the current set-up of double-stacked cages. Wet manure in the existing operation allows flies to breed. In the cage-free setting, foraging chickens will consume the fly larvae, according to a city staff report.”

The article also notes that this conversion to a cage-free facility “should mean 60,000 fewer chickens than the 192,000 now in the houses.” By eliminating the use of cages in egg CAFOs, fewer birds are confined in existing sheds, resulting in less concentrated waste at each operation.

Conclusion

The prestigious Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production released the results of a 2.5-year investigation into the problems associated with factory farming. The Commission found that the factory farming system “often poses unacceptable risks to public health, the environment and the welfare of the animals themselves.” Requiring cage-free conditions would be an important step towards lessening the environmental harm (as well as animal suffering) caused by CAFOs.