

OTHER NEWS

Even in Kansas cattle country, locals are opposing a mega feedlot in Pawnee County

BY CALEN MOORE
HPPR/Kansas News Service

The cattle feedlots on the western side of Kansas produce a significant amount of the beef in your grocery store. But a small town in the region is now opposing a feedlot because of health and environmental concerns.

PAWNEE COUNTY — The western side of Kansas is a great place to produce beef.

It has wide open spaces that seem to go on forever and low humidity. The region has embraced its beef culture and is now home to 75% of the state's feedlots. These facilities are where cattle are sent to be fed a high-energy diet to gain weight before being sent to a beef packing plant.

Outside of small towns these feedlots look like miles of fences with cattle standing end to end. But some people have started to be wary of these expansive developments.

"It's good to live in beef country, as long as it ain't too close. They're able to stir up enough dust and stink," Merrill Cauble said.

Cauble is a farmer who lives near the town of Larned in Pawnee County. He has been skeptical of the increase of feedlots near where he lives.

PUSHING BACK AGAINST THE NORM

The company Innovative Livestock Solutions has feedlots across central Kansas and Nebraska. There are three in Pawnee County with a combined capacity of 72,000 cattle.

They are looking to expand and proposed a new facility that can hold 88,000 cattle. That's a lot of livestock for a county with only about 6,000 people. It would be one of the biggest feedlots in Kansas.

All those animals are estimated to produce over 5 million pounds of manure every day. Beef cattle eat high protein diets, which can produce nitrogen heavy manure. That poses a risk if it gets into waterways or seeps into the aquifer underground where



Cattle stand in pens awaiting their feed in a feed yard near Garden City. CALEN MOORE/KNS

people get their drinking water.

"It's not going to do the community any good whatsoever, and that's why we decided to push back," Cauble said.

After the Kansas Department of Health and Environment reviewed the feedlot's plans, the agency held a public hearing in Larned to see what the town had to say about it.

Cauble teamed up with the Kansas Sierra Club, an environmental advocacy group. The duo along with those critical of another huge feedlot were vocal about their concerns to KDHE.

"These feed yards have been polluting our waters for years, and their recommendations haven't improved the problem to the extent to where we have safe nitrate levels," Cauble said.

They gained quite the following of locals questioning the safety of another large feedlot near the community.

SOMETHING IN THE WATER

Pawnee County and other central Kansas counties already have an established history of high nitrate levels in their groundwater.

The soil in this region is very sandy, so things can easily leak through. The community also sits above the Ogallala aquifer. Towns like Larned rely almost exclusively on the aquifer for drinking water.

Late last year,

student researchers from three Kansas colleges found that nitrate levels in private wells in south-central Kansas are as much as five times higher than Environmental Protection Agency limits for healthy drinking water, which is 10 milligrams per liter.

High nitrate levels in water can cause "blue baby syndrome" where children under six months have their blood deprived of oxygen. There are also some studies that link high nitrate levels with increased risk of some colon and kidney cancers.

The researchers say the pollution is likely due to fertilizer leaking into the groundwater. But some Larned residents believe that fresh feedlot manure is contributing to that as well, but it's not clear if that has been proven.

According to the EPA, Kansas ranks second in the nation in estimated area with higher levels of nitrates in drinking water than permissible.

The EPA estimates that 5% of Kansans have private, unregulated water wells.

Kansas State University student Chase Glasscock said most of those Kansans are farmers who keep the economy going, and neglecting their

needs could hurt the state.

"If we're not taking care of them, then we're not taking care of ourselves," Glasscock said when presenting his data to the public in November.

RESPONSE FROM THE HEALTH DEPARTMENT AND COMPANY

KDHE said in an email that the reason the ILS feedlot was approved was because it met all the statutory and regulatory requirements. But the agency did acknowledge the elevated risk the region has due to its soil composition.

To try and address the community's concerns, KDHE provided stricter guidelines than the minimum to control pollution. That includes seepage requirements for the manure lagoon and protections for groundwater much greater than required by state law.

"We are committed to our role in protecting the environment but also acknowledge that owners of feeding facilities have rights that have been set in law. We are only able to enforce requirements that we have jurisdiction over," KDHE spokesperson Mitchell Osterlund said.

ILS also expressed an interest to go above

and beyond and adhere to more stringent standards tailored to this unique situation.

ILS sent Jon Skelton, their chief financial officer, to the meeting to calm the waters.

Skelton told the attendees that a significant number of ILS shareholders live locally within or near the county.

ILS didn't respond to a request for comment.

There have been proponents of the feedlot who have been surprised by the negative backlash. A few spoke at the public hearing and have been trying to make the case that this feedlot will create economic opportunities.

It's estimated that the feedlot will create 70 jobs for the town, but also could provide a strong market for nearby farmers and agribusinesses.

Pawnee County has been steadily losing its population for decades. Some here are eager for new business and development.

In a press release, ILS estimated it will contribute approximately \$50 million in added valuation to Pawnee County's tax base.

With the permit approved, construction is planned to start later this year, with the facility operating by 2027.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

Felix Revello is a chapter delegate for the Kansas Sierra Club near Larned. He has been leading the charge in opposition to the feedlot.

"We want the permit to operate the proposed feedlot withheld until after any water and air pollution from existing feedlots is researched and remediated," Revello said.

Revello and Cauble spent their time at a local festival handing out a petition to appeal KDHE's approval of the feedlot's permit. With over 50 signatures and a lot of firsthand stories about health and environmental concerns with a feedlot of this magnitude, Revello delivered the information to Gov. Laura Kelly's office.

"Urban areas would not tolerate this level of health risk and pollution," Revello said. "Why do we constantly ask our rural residents to?"

The Kansas News Service is a collaboration of KCUR, Kansas Public Radio, KMWU and High Plains Public Radio focused on health, the social determinants of health and their connection to public policy.

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What is prediabetes?

With prediabetes, blood sugar levels are higher than normal but not high enough for a type 2 diabetes diagnosis.



Prediabetes is a serious health condition that increases your risk of developing type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.



FINNEY COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Good news! If you have prediabetes, the CDC-led National Diabetes Prevention Program can help you reduce your risk and improve your health. When you join, you'll learn how to make lifestyle changes that can make a difference.

To register, contact the Finney County Health Department at (620) 272-3600. The classes start on June 27.

The program will meet once a week at noon on Fridays for the first 16 sessions. Followed by 6-monthly sessions. All classes will be held at the Health Department located at 919 Zerr Rd.

Space is limited, so be sure to register soon!