

DNR wants more focus on farms

Environmental groups suggest raising fees to fund additional staff

*By Lee Bergquist
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The Department of Natural Resources plans to add more staff to regulate the state's biggest farms, but environmental groups say the farms should also pay higher fees to fund a program that was criticized in a recent legislative audit.

While it is planning to cut overall spending in the next budget, the DNR has proposed moving four employees into a program that regulates the largest livestock operations.

Concentrated
animal feeding
operations, or
CAFOs, have
cattle populations

that can reach into the thousands and produce as much waste as some Wisconsin cities.

In its 2017-19 budget that goes to the Natural Resources Board on Wednesday, DNR officials are proposing to increase overall staffing in the CAFO program to 21. At least two of the positions, and possibly more, would be deployed to the field to monitor farm activities, including manure spreading.

Manure handling, especially among large farms, has become an increasingly controversial issue as the number of CAFOs has grown. Complaints range from odor and traffic to the impact of spreading millions of gallons of liquid manure and its potential harm to groundwater, lakes, rivers, streams and wetlands.

The new jobs would come from a pool of about 350 existing vacancies in an agency of more than 2,500 employees. Employment has dropped by nearly 18 percent since 1995, according to DNR figures, and the next budget calls for more position cuts.

Environmental groups, which believe the agency is already understaffed, said the DNR should be devoting more resources to environmental protection. One way is for large-

scale farms to pay more for a permit that regulates the discharge of pollutants, they say.

The current annual charge is \$345. The DNR receives \$95 of that amount and the rest goes into the state's general fund.

Meanwhile, the state's largest municipalities pay more than \$100,000 a year for a comparable permit.

The DNR says that adding personnel is a response to growing concerns over the effect CAFOs can have on public health and water resources.

The number of large farms rose from 44 in 2000 to 285 in 2016—an increase of 548 percent, according to DNR figures.

In June, the Legislative Audit Bureau released a critical report on the DNR's wastewater program between 2005 and 2015 for municipalities, industry and large farms and found shortcomings in all of them.

For CAFOs, auditors reported the highest level of staff turnover, determined that 17 farms were inspected after their permit was issued and found only 36 of 1,900 reports that farms were required to submit were recorded electronically.

But the DNR also told auditors it takes new employees with prior experience about two years to become proficient at permit work. For someone without experience, it takes up to five years.

Environmental groups and farm organizations both say they support plans for additional staff.

Environmental groups complained that large farms are paying a pittance compared with cities.

"I think the current fee is ridiculously low," said Amber Meyer Smith, a lobbyist with Clean Wisconsin. "Remember, this is a permit review that is happening to protect the waterways and to try to prevent pollution from these operations.

"And when the DNR is putting in all of this additional work and not being paid for it by the applicant, then it ends up being paid for by the taxpayer."

As a comparison, Rosendale Dairy in Fond du Lac County, one of the state's largest farms, has 8,800 milking and dry cows, in addition to other cattle, according to state records.

The farm produces as much manure as a city of 158,000 people, according to an estimate by Gordon Stevenson, a retired DNR employee who was formerly chief of runoff management.

Stevenson says excessive manure spreading is exacerbating Wisconsin's water pollution problems. He uses an estimate that one cow creates the same waste as 18 humans.

Rosendale pays a \$345 permit fee. By comparison, the Green Bay Sewerage District paid \$116,000 for its wastewater permit in 2016, which serves more than 231,000 people in the region, according to the district.

Metropolitan Madison's fee is about \$215,000 and the City of Waukesha's is about \$12,000, according to officials in those communities. Municipalities make payments on the volume of pollution they produce. CAFOs pay a flat fee.

State auditors noted the disparity between fees but did not draw any conclusions.

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