

ARTICLE



Problems in Animal Ag Have Gotten Worse Since Pew Report

By [Ralph Loglisci](#) on [October 22, 2013](#)



StumbleUpon



Google +



On April 29, 2008, the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production (PCIFAP) released the findings of a two-and-a-half-year examination of the food animal industry to the nation. Their conclusion: The current system of raising animals posed unacceptable risks to public health and the environment. Five years later, an [in-depth analysis](#) by the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) determined that instead of getting better, the problem has actually gotten worse since the commission released its seminal report, [Putting Meat on the Table: Industrial Farm Animal Production in America](#).

CLF along with the [Pew Charitable Trusts](#) helped form and fund the independent Commission back in 2005.

PCIFAP was made up of 14 renowned experts in the areas of public health, human and veterinary medicine, business, government, rural advocacy and animal welfare. For two-and-a-half years, Commissioners traveled across the country studying the issues, visiting facilities, talking with farmers, scientists, industry leaders, and community members. When it came down to it, Commissioners said the risks to public health and the environment are too great and the scientific evidence are too strong to ignore.

Fast forward to 2013, the problems surrounding industrial animal agriculture have only magnified, while evidence of its risks have grown significantly. For example, the number of studies linking animal agriculture to human cases of resistant bacterial infections are growing steadily. Just recently researchers from the [Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health](#) published a study in JAMA Internal Medicine, which for the first time examined the association between living next to an industrial food animal facility and manure-applied crop fields and MRSA infections in the community.

I consider myself fortunate to be one of the five PCIFAP staff members who helped guide the Commissioners through thousands of documents and hundreds of hours of meetings and deliberations. I served as the Director of Communications and later joined CLF for a number of years as the Director of the Johns Hopkins Healthy Monday Project.

Last week, during a [10-year anniversary celebration for Meatless Monday](#), I had a chance to sit down with my old boss, former PCIFAP Executive Director Robert Martin and take a walk down memory lane. Martin is now CLF's Director of Food System Policy. Below is an excerpt from our talk.

What is the key finding of CLF's analysis?

The key finding is really held in the conclusion of the report and that is that across the boards regulatory and legislative efforts have failed and that in each area the problems have worsened. There is more concentration in the food animal industry now. There are fewer companies. Antibiotic resistance has grown worse. In one sense it's a missed opportunity as well.

What would you attribute that to?

I think the main reason is the overwhelming influence and power of the animal ag industry. That was one of the things we said in the original report. At every turn you can see undue or over-influence by the industrial animal ag sector. Whether it's affecting members of Congress, whether it's denting and nearly breaking the regulatory process, or whether it's too much influence over academics. Everywhere you look there's too much influence by the industry.

After the report was released, one of the biggest complaints from industry groups, such as Animal Ag Alliance, were claims that the Commission was biased because we started from the premise that there were problems with industrial animal production. Throughout all the times that we met with industry reps, I believe it was during a Commission meeting in Colorado that finally Commissioners were able to break through this wall that industry had put up. One brave rep for the United Egg Producers, Chad Gregory, answered Vice Chair Michael Blackwell's question, "How are you going to be able to produce enough eggs when the U.S. population reaches 400 million?" with the uncharacteristically honest answer, "I don't know." At that moment, all the other industry reps in the room let out a gasp, as if they had just realized the curtain they were working so hard to keep us from pulling back was now open and that oops, maybe there are some problems. Do you think that one of the Commission's achievements

was getting industry to recognize there are problems?

Yes, I think so. I think that's a very good point. I think that Chad Gregory was probably the only person in the industrial sector that dealt openly and honestly with us the entire tenure of the Commission. And I think it's no surprise that the group that he is president for has tried to develop a national standard on battery cage size or egg production cage size, because he did recognize the problems. I think there are still some knee-jerk reactionary people in the industry that anytime you say there's a problem they say, well how are you going to feed 10 Billion people? Well, we didn't talk about this in the Commission, but the fact of the matter is depending on who you ask, we raise [enough food calories for 10-13 Billion people now](#). It's just we don't do it efficiently. So, I do think that there is more of an awareness that the industry is facing problems and pretty serious challenges.

I mean, all you have to do is look around [several western Kansas counties have run out of water](#) 30 years earlier than they were anticipating in an area that's heavy in beef slaughter capacity, so they are using lots of water. You've seen the really wild swings in weather that I think have concerned the industry. And you even see some of the most ardent advocates for the status quo in the industry saying in relation to, for example, the [Ag-gag laws](#) saying, "You know what, maybe this is the wrong approach?" Shielding these operations from public view is probably the wrong approach. We need to be more open and transparent. I think that some of that comes from the Pew Commission.

One of the most disappointing things that I took away from all of this is that industry prefers to hide problems and try to fix them behind the scenes. I think industry in particular is doing its best to hide the real public health risks. Not only is there a great risk of antibiotic resistance, but the risk of developing novel viruses that can lead to pandemics are very real.

We did focus more on the antibiotic resistance because of the makeup of the Commission. I think that was where our public health and medical people had expertise. And it's interesting, not to get too far down on a tangent, but when [ADUFA \(Animal Drug User Fee Act\)](#) was going to be reauthorized in 2008, people in Senator Kennedy's office used the Pew Commission report as an argument for attaching the [Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act \(PAMTA\)](#) to the ADUFA reauthorization.

Through negotiations and pushback from the industry they dropped PAMTA and settled on making data collection public. If it hadn't been for the Pew report saying antibiotic resistance is a problem the industry they might have convinced them to keep the data collection private. But industry thought, well we'll fudge a bit, because they were saying only 18 percent was being used in food animal production. Union of Concerned Scientists were saying 70 percent, but because the Pew Commission report was used to get that data collection—and Ralph you were able to find the data for human use from the FDA—we [finally found out it's actually 80 percent](#).

As far as viruses, it's interesting. I had forgotten that we talked very much about it at all. When the outbreak of swine flu struck, about 3 years ago, it came out of [a hog operation in Mexico](#). I actually had a news media person call me and say, "You guys predicted this." And I said, "Uh, really? We did?" He said yeah, "Page 13 of the [report](#) says these operations are incubators for novel flu viruses and if you co-locate poultry operations near a swine operation that increases the problem." And we did say—it was only about three paragraphs—we did say it is a concern to the immediate population who work in CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) and their family members in the community and we said something like, "It's not

a matter of if, but when a novel flu virus will come out of a swine operation, because pigs, like people, are susceptible to swine flue, human flu and avian flu.” And that’s, in fact, what came out was a recombined novel flu virus.

While campaigning for the 2008 election, President Obama had promised to address these issues, but his Administration has done very little.

[President Obama], in 2008, I think really to win the Iowa Caucuses, he had probably the best sustainable agricultural policy of any of the candidates, Democrat or Republican. In the North Carolina primary he was given a copy of the Pew Commission report in 2008 and was asked what do you think and he said I endorse their recommendations. You know you get to power and then all of sudden the people that you put into place in the USDA, FDA, and EPA, don’t follow through. And when they try to do things they get significant push back from the industry and the industry goes to Capitol Hill. So, the whole story about reducing antibiotic use through FDA guidelines—[going back to ’77- really is a good case study on that](#). You know, the medical professions and public health professionals wanted to pull certain antibiotics out of productions. They opened the process to do that, started the process, Congress intervened and they dropped it for 36 years and now it’s taking legal action to get those to move ahead.

I think one of the things we don’t hear enough about is the social justice issue. For me that’s what made the difference. Going to meet the people from REACH (Rural Empowerment Association for Community Help) in North Carolina. Going to see what was actually happening in these communities where people really felt oppressed.

Yeah, it was stunning. You know you are kind of intellectually aware of that stuff, but you go down and you meet with people and the local sheriff comes to visit. In 21st Century America, are you kidding me? It is really part of the power structure. I actually think the meeting in North Carolina was a watershed moment for a lot of our people. I think it tended to really intensify their interest in tackling some of these issues. After meeting with some of the people and actually [viewing the interviews you did](#) when you went back to Duplin County with some of the Commissioners. Catching the swine operation spraying waste in violation of the law in rain, I think that was a real eye-opener.

So, what do you hope this CLF report will accomplish? How do you hope to move the issues forward?

This is really an academic review, a pretty straightforward review. It is not a polemic. The conclusion does point out that things have gotten worse and the Obama Administration and Congress has failed to act when the information is overwhelming that we need to act now.

I think issues are going to drive change at some point. You’ve got this big group of people who want to see change. The problems of antibiotic resistance are worsening—the problems of 500 million tons of (animal) waste we produce each year are worsening and the ground in many areas of the country is really saturated with phosphorous. You can’t transport the material, so you’ve got to disperse the animals. So, the problems are reaching really a crisis point. So that could really force action too.

Comments are closed.

Website by **SOUTH BEND**