**Health Departments' Involvement with Factory Farms Limited**

A study finds that health departments are hindered in addressing public health concerns from animal-production sites.

*February 8, 2013*

|  |
| --- |
| Survey participants living near large-scale swine farms told researchers at John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future that health departments have little to no input on decisions involving animal-production sites. Photo courtesy Hemera/Thinkstock (HobbyFarms.com) *Courtesy Hemera/Thinkstock* Survey participants living near large-scale swine farms told researchers at John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future that health departments have little to no input on decisions involving animal-production sites. |

State and local health departments face significant barriers and usually don’t get involved when confronted with public health concerns resulting from food-animal production sites, according to a new study led by researchers at the [Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future](http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-a-livable-future/) at the Bloomberg School of Public Health.

The authors of the study, published in *PLOS ONE*, an open-access journal of scientific research, examined the role of local and state health departments in responding to and preventing community-driven concerns associated with animal-production sites. This study developed two of the authors discovered that community members might assume that local health departments actively monitor and address potential concerns arising from large animal-production sites. The authors’ prior experience indicated that this perception might be misinformed.

For the study, "Investigating the Role of State and Local Health Departments in Addressing Public Health Concerns Related to Industrial Food Animal Production Sites,” researchers interviewed community members and officials representing 13 county and eight state health departments. Survey participants were selected in areas with high densities or rapid growth of large swine-production sites. Researchers asked participants a series of questions in an effort to find out what health and environmental concerns are reported to health departments, how the health departments respond, and to determine barriers that might prevent increased involvement.

Past studies have shown [air near animal-production sites](http://www.hobbyfarms.com/farm-industry-news/2011/03/25/foul-air-at-factory-farms.aspx) to contain hydrogen sulfide, particulate matter and allergens. Exposure to these emissions has been associated with multiple respiratory, cardiovascular and neurological health problems. Health department employees surveyed told investigators that although some are often contacted by concerned community members living in close proximity to animal-production sites, limited staff resources, lack of expertise or training, jurisdictional issues, and political pressures can hinder follow-up.

"Even though health departments are charged with monitoring and responding to the public health concerns of a community, most interviewed for the study said they had no involvement in decisions made about animal-production sites,” says Jillian Fry, PhD, lead author of the study. Primary regulatory authority over animal-production sites frequently falls within the departments of environment or natural resources, according to a report by the National Council of State Legislatures. "We believe formal involvement by state and local health departments may better protect the health of individuals in the community,” Fry says.

Political and economic pressures were frequently cited as barriers to health departments becoming involved. Similarly, the researchers heard from participants that efforts to establish ordinances regulating animal-production sites are often hindered by economic and political power held by agricultural corporations. As a result of the lack of health department involvement with concerns regarding animal-production sites, community members surveyed noted they were, in essence, attempting to fill the role of health departments by performing environmental monitoring and educating and informing the community. Community members said they often sought help and information from other government agencies, researchers and other groups—on a national or state level—to answer questions about animal-production health concerns.

Community members surveyed said engaging a health department about animal-production concerns had never led to a resolution.

"Health departments generally don’t get involved,” Fry says. "When they do, our study found that usually no action is ultimately taken to correct a potentially serious threat to public health.”

Community leaders contacted in the study unanimously supported an expanded role for health departments to become involved in animal production, equal to that of other state and local agencies. Health departments could be involved with animal-production sites through assessment, education, outreach, monitoring and participating in permitting decisions.

"We believe it is critical for affected communities, healthcare providers, policy makers and public health professionals to be aware of the limited engagement on this issue by health departments,” Fry says. "Health departments could play a more significant role in addressing community members’ health concerns if resources and the political landscape changed.”

Fry and the study’s coauthors believe health departments with animal-production sites in their county or state should be provided with training, educational materials and additional funding to increase their understanding of the human health concerns surrounding animal agriculture.

"Even with these additional resources, or a change in jurisdictional authority, political barriers will likely continue to be a significant challenge to fully addressing animal production and public health,” Fry says.

<http://www.hobbyfarms.com/farm-industry-news/2013/02/08/limited-health-department-involvement-with-factory-farms.aspx>