

Tortured Nature

The Rise and Rise of Gulag-Ag

By Steven Higgs

For David Kirby, it's not too much of a stretch to argue that candidate Barack Obama's position on Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) helped elect him president.

Iowa has one of the worst factory farm records in the nation, says Kirby, author of the new book, *Animal Factory: The Looming Threat of Industrial Pig, Dairy, and Poultry Farms to Humans and the Environment*, from St. Martin's Press. Hillary Clinton's stand on CAFOs wasn't nearly strong enough to satisfy Iowa Democrats. And by the time they cast their caucus votes on Jan. 3, 2008, John Edwards, even though he was very good on the issue, had overstayed his welcome.

"There was some Edwards fatigue there at the end, and those voters had to go somewhere," Kirby said when I interviewed him recently in his Brooklyn home. "And when they weighed Hillary and Barack, they went with Obama at the last minute. I think the rural voters did so because he was very strong on regulating CAFOs and made a lot of promises that haven't been fulfilled yet."

Kirby is a former aide to New York Mayor David Dinkins and a former *New York Times* reporter, who published *Evidence of Harm: Mercury in Vaccines and the Autism Epidemic: A Medical Controversy* in 2005. The California native and UC-Berkeley graduate spent three years researching *Animal Factory*. He visited 18 states, from the Neuse River watershed in rural southeastern North Carolina to the Yakima Valley in Washington State. And not only did he get an earful from those who, like thousands of Iowa Caucus voters, are neighbors to factory farms, he also got a nose full, many times over.

"My nose and throat would be coated with crap, literally," Kirby remembers. "I even remember coming home and opening my suitcases and just getting a whiff of that cow smell. The pigs smell the worst, but the cows make you sicker."

Animal Factory was inspired by citizens who share their land, water and air with factory farms. "It is told from the point of view of people who live in rural

environments, largely conservative, bed-rock Americans, Republicans." They are, for the most part, family farmers who lived quiet, normal lives until their communities were invaded by CAFOs that bred or raised "hundreds if not thousands of animals nearby, on land that's barely large enough to support a few animals."

His subjects are citizens who refused to accept the changing status quo. "These people had enough. They'd had enough of the stink, they'd had enough of the **"My nose and throat would be coated with crap, literally," Kirby remembers. "I even remember coming home and opening my suitcases and just getting a whiff of that cow smell. The pigs smell the worst, but the cows make you sicker."**

flies, of the water contamination. They were very concerned about the impact these facilities were having on their local communities. They were displacing small family farms. They were not particularly contributing to the local economy. And they were coming at a very, very fast pace."

In most instances, the C in CAFO means "concentrated," but it can also stand for "confined," as in Confined Feeding Operations (CFOs). Regardless what the letters stand for, the meaning is the same: the concentration and confinement of huge numbers of hogs, cows, chickens and turkeys in places where sustainable agriculture had served both farmers and society for centuries.

"Many in the [Yakima] Valley had watched with heavy hearts as family dairies of 75 cows or so went out of business, replaced by enormous, corporate-backed behemoths that could milk and feed 5,000 or more cows within a single

confinement," Kirby writes in *Animal Factory*.

Indiana is another state Kirby highlights in the book. "I spent a lot of time in Indiana, I went there several times, I went everywhere," he said, punctuating the last point with a long laugh, "just about everywhere." Hoosier law defines CFO as "any animal feeding operation engaged in the confined feeding of at least 300 cattle, or 600 swine or sheep, or 30,000 fowl, such as chickens, turkeys or other poultry," according to the Indiana Department of Environmental Management. There is no maximum.

CAFO or CFO, the concentration of so many animals and so much waste presents serious threats to the environment and human health. The animals generate far more urine and feces than the land can absorb. And the farm owners store it in giant waste lagoons that rupture, leak, overtop and spill into creeks and rivers, causing algae blooms and fish kills.

Karen Hudson from West Central Illinois is one of the *Animal Factory* profiles. She lived with large swine facilities and a dairy in her hometown of Elmwood, which had the largest lagoon breach in state history. It spilled "millions and millions" of gallons of waste into a creek that feeds into the Peoria River, which feeds into the Mississippi River, which feeds into the Gulf of Mexico, which is home to the largest dead zone in the world.

During his time in the Yakima Valley, the Central Valley of California and, to a lesser extent, in Texas, Kirby experienced "brown fogs" that made him physically ill. It gets so bad at times that motorists have to turn on their headlights in the middle of the day. "You are inhaling dangerous gases that escape from the lagoons, that escape from these barns with their giant fans that push this stuff out."

Yakima's Helen Reddout, whom Kirby describes as a "full-fledged warrior activist," is another of the trio of citizen activists he builds *Animal Factory* around. And the stuff she has been exposed to by living in the midst of CAFOs is dangerous indeed. It can include live viruses and bacteria, he said, as well as particulate matter, animal protein, dander, feces and mold. They also spray the insides with pesticides and insecticides. "All of that stuff gets blown out."

Amid the fugitive pollutants is ammonia, which is dangerous to the eyes, the

nose and throat. "It will carry long distances," Kirby said. "We've seen ammonia mist, it's kind of like an acid rain that can hurt forests. It deposits in the water and converts into nitrates and nitrogen and can cause algae blooms, which kill fish." Hydrogen sulfide, the smell of rotten eggs, doesn't make people crazy just because it smells bad. "It can cause depression, violent behavior, neuro-developmental disorders."

Methane has accumulated under the synthetic liner in one lagoon in East Central Indiana and forced a 30-foot-high bubble above the surface. "I don't know what the status is right now, but a few weeks ago they were very worried that this could just explode and be a huge disaster," Kirby said. Today, neighbors report that there are 17 such places where the liner has pushed through 14 feet of manure. And methane can be deadly. "People die near lagoons sometimes, when they get too close, they breathe in the methane, and they pass out, and they die." Living in the crowded, isolated confines of a CAFO also makes the animals more susceptible to disease, Kirby continued, which requires the use of antibiotics "to keep the animals alive and keep them thriving." That can lead to the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

And then there are the viral mutations. "It's very, very likely this is where the swine flu epidemic came from," Kirby points out, "from a large-scale facility."

Manure, of course, has always been part and parcel of the farming industry. But, typically speaking, sustainable farms have always had enough animals per acre to live in harmony with the land. They nourish the pastures that nourish them. "You have a wonderful closed system. You have enough land that can absorb the waste and then take that waste and turn it back into nutrients to feed the animals."

But, by design, CAFO systems force the land to carry more animals than it can support. "There's not enough land to absorb all the nutrients produced in that waste. So, you have to either overapply it, or you have to make arrangements to send it offsite." It also means that nutrients must be imported to feed the animals, which means burning fossil fuels, which means more atmospheric pollution.

Retired Marine J.A.G. Rick Dove is the

third *Animal Factory* profile. He lives in North Carolina, where they grow some corn but not nearly enough to feed all the pigs. Everyday they bring in trainloads of grain, he told Kirby, and nearly all of those nutrients, all of the phosphorus and nitrogen, stay in North Carolina in one form or another.

"Most of it stays behind in the form of the manure, and every year you're just bringing in far more nutrients than you're exporting," Kirby said, "and you end up with oversaturation."

The economics of CAFOs are almost as threatening as the environmental and health impacts. From the moment an animal is conceived to the time it ends up on a plate or packaged in the supermarket, large companies control the entire process. "They perpetuate a corporate food system where a very small number of companies control a very large part of what we eat," Kirby said of CAFOs, "from semen to cellophane, as they say."

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That vertically integrated, corporate concentration reduces competition by eliminating market access for smaller producers and any opportunity for them to have their products sold in the supermarket. "Yeah, we get food that's pretty cheap. We have the cheapest food in history. But we're paying for it in other ways." Hundreds of millions of fish in the Neuse (pronounced "noose") River that flows through Rick Dove's hometown of New Bern, N.C., paid one price. The berg of 23,000-plus today was the site in 1991 of one of the worst fish kills in state history.

"Rick and his neighbors woke up one morning to the stench of hundreds of millions of dead menhaden lining the banks for miles," Kirby writes in *Animal Factory*. "In the following days, bass, striper, mullet, crab and shrimp also turned up dead. They were all pocked with round, red sores, as though some specter had sucked the lifeblood from their flesh."

It would take two years of environ-

mental detective work by Dove before the source of the '91 New Bern fish kill was identified: a microscopic organism called *Pfiesteria*, which kills fish, leaves marks, and is nourished by nutrients found in pig poop. New Bern was downstream from one of the heaviest concentration of CAFOs in the nation.

To address the water quality issues, the state in 1997 imposed a moratorium on construction of new CAFOs with lagoons. The goal was to steer the industry away from the lagoon system and invest in new technologies. The law was renewed in 2003.

At the last minute, however, some mainstream environmental groups negotiated a deal in Raleigh that said, if an existing lagoon is in imminent danger of rupturing, the CAFO could get a permit to build a new lagoon. Lagoons typically last about 20 years, so most of them in North Carolina are 20 years old or less and are approaching the end of their lifetimes.

"Guess what, they're going to start rupturing," Kirby said. "So, this provision is very worrisome for environmentalists down there. Activists, they feel like they got sold out, that this emergency-replacement provision is just going to perpetuate the lagoon system indefinitely for the future."

Robert Kennedy Jr. and the WaterKeepers sued over the North Carolina CAFOs and reached an agreement with Smithfield Farms and some other large producers that required them to identify and switch to alternative technologies. But while they spent hundreds of thousands of dollars and identified five promising alternatives, none met a per-pound, per-pig cost that the agreement also required.

"Basically, as some of the environmentalists had predicted and worried, it let Smithfield off the hook," Kirby said. "They said, 'Look, we tried to develop the technology. We found some good stuff, but it would cut into our profits too much. If we had to implement this, it would make our products cost more, and then we would no longer be competitive with pigs grown in other states or grown in other countries.' So, it didn't happen."

As he prepared to go out and talk about *Animal Factory* and CAFOs, Kirby has increasingly turned his attention to solutions. "What tools are there, really, what could be done to level the playing

field so that smaller producers, independent producers, could have more fair competition with the big companies, more access to the marketplace?" he said. "And what could be done to try to reduce the spread of CAFOs if people are opposed to them?"

With respect to slowing their spread, just about everywhere Kirby went he heard calls for local control over CAFO permitting. Communities usually can decide if giant, polluting industries move into their jurisdictions. But because CAFOs are agricultural, they are exempt from a lot of these regulatory remedies.

"Counties simply don't have say over whether these things can be built or not. They can prescribe certain building codes, they can do that, but they can't just refuse a permit to a CAFO just because they want to." The problem, of course, is that neighboring counties could permit CAFOs right across the county line, but I think local control would go a long way."

The marketplace is beholden to corporate-controlled processing plants that run 24 hours a day and produce uniform products. So, they contract out with the really, really big producers. "It's much easier to buy a thousand pigs from one grower than a hundred pigs from 10 different growers, with 10 different types of pigs ... These factories are calibrated to slaughter and process certain size pigs, chickens, eggs, etc. So they want uniformity, they want large amounts that they can buy all at once, very cheap."

This "vertical integration" tends to shut out the small, independent farmers, who have nowhere else to go. They can raise animals, but, if they can't get them slaughtered or the meat-processed, packaged, distributed and sold, the animals are worthless. That is what has forced a lot of people out of the business."

Kirby ends *Animal Factory* with the Obama administration which owes the farm families that helped him get elected. The record is not particularly encouraging so far. On the plus side, the Justice and Agriculture departments will hold workshops early this year on anticompetitive measures. Breaking up the vertical integration monopolies is essential, Kirby said. There is the positive symbolism of Michele Obama's organic garden. But Obama's appointment of former Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack as secretary of agriculture and his tenure thus far don't bode well for those family farmers in Iowa

whose votes were so critical in the Iowa caucuses.

"Vilsack remained largely above the fray of ongoing feuds over the placement of confined animal feeding operations near rural communities," the *Iowa Independent* reported when Obama announced his appointment in December 2008. "Groups on the left who would like to give local communities stricter control over where the CAFOs are allowed felt betrayed by their governor's unwillingness to help, but his stance kept agribusiness interests relatively quiet."

Ronnie Cummins, executive director of the Organic Consumers Association,

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put it more bluntly in a column at the same time: "While Vilsack has worked to restrain livestock monopolies, his overall record is one of aiding and abetting Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations." His nomination, he said, "sent a chill through the sustainable food and farming community who have been lobbying for a champion in the new administration."

Writing about the swine flu last June, *Grist* Food Editor Tom Philpott wrote of Secretary Vilsack: "In a Congressional hearing last month, he cravenly defended the safety of industrial meat production – even though U.S. regulatory agencies have no mechanism in place to test the U.S. herd for H1N1."

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on the issue for some desperately needed publicity.

Now, after three months of less-than-edifying handwringing over its shattered prospects for ad sales and phone-based browsing in China (the means, by which the advantages of the glorious search engine are monetized), Google has decided to openly defy the PRC government by forwarding in-China search queries to Google Hong Kong for unfiltered results (banned results are still blocked on the inbound return by China's Great Firewall).

In the eyes of the PRC, the dispute has acquired an overt political dimension. To China's detriment – and Google's benefit – it appears that the knuckleheads inside the Chinese Communist Party won the contest to try to manage the Google news cycle.

On March 26, the major U.S. news outlets published a translation of an internal Chinese government document, leaked to the UC-Berkeley-based news aggregator *China Digital Times* that described the news management agenda in the wake of Google's decision. The key

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element in the Chinese framing is the statement, "Netizen discussions on this matter are not limited to the commercial sphere."

In other words, it has been determined that the discussions are veering into the political realm. Defining the boundaries and content of acceptable political debate is the declared monopoly of the Chinese Communist Party, and that gives the information management apparatchiks the justification for heavy handed meddling in blogs and message boards, as well as on registered news sites.

As the circular says, "Please have the various localities purge all text, images, audio, and video that use this matter as a pretext to attack the party, the state, government departments, and related Internet policy..." And... "Also please purge all text, images, audio, and video – of support of Google, presenting flowers to Google, urging Google to stay, cheering on Google – that sing a tune in opposition to government policy." Even before these guidelines were leaked, Chinese media watchers, such as the EastSouthNorthWest blog, were already

reporting that pro-Google comments were being scrubbed from Chinese discussion sites.

As China's relations with the U.S.A. and Europe deteriorate in the run-up to a bruising battle on China's RMB exchange rate, the PRC has been playing the propaganda and information control calliope with a superabundance of energy but a corresponding lack in subtlety. The sledgehammer approach is typified by the March 25 editorial in *People's Daily* overseas edition with the immortal title, "Google is not a God" (followed by the helpful clarification that "Google is not a virgin" either).

Any domestic gains, achieved by pushing domestic critics into a resentful silence by erasing their comments, charging them with engaging in anti-party/anti-government discourse, have been offset by the international public relations debacle that the leaking of the guidelines has caused. Also the attitude of cowed obedience which Chinese journalists are supposed to display has been further eroded.

With anti-Google anger a feeble rally-

ing cry, the ever more rebellious Chinese media beginning to leak like a sieve, and U.S. opinion on the lookout for more reasons to jump on the PRC, the Chinese government will probably find it necessary to ratchet down the rhetoric, resist the temptation to disrupt Google's Hong Kong-based search engine host – and mollify China's prickly netizens with improvements to the Baidu search engine.

Baidu occupied the leading search engine share in China even before the Google spat, but it gets no love from sophisticated business and academic users for its incomplete, advertising-driven results. If China can divert a fraction of the manpower, abilities, and resources it devotes to monitoring and controlling the Internet into upgrading its domestic Internet products and performance, it will have a better chance of putting its Google troubles behind it.

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