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An Uphill Battle

Everyday millions of Americans enjoy pork chops, BLT's, and sausage pizza, yet few actually realize the major changes occurring in the pork industry. The number of small family hog farms is decreasing rapidly as the growth of large scale factory hog farms increases. Competing with this big business is definitely an uphill battle for the small family hog farms.

Family hog farms have been around for centuries with their primary aim to produce meat as a secondary source of income through added value marketing of their grain through livestock. Family farms typically raise a couple hundred hogs to accomplish their purposes. On the other hand, factory hog farms typically raise 100,000 or more hogs per site for the sole purpose of making large profits. This new system of raising hogs has developed rapidly in the nineties and continues to grow every day.

The family hog farm is owned and operated by the same person or family. Factory farms, however, may be owned by many venture capitalists that often live miles away in different states. As owners, they might only speak to the manager on the phone for periodic profit reports. Factory farms frequently have investors who view profits first and foremost.

Family farms raise their hogs in small barns or outside in fenced areas. Their hogs are a diversity of breeds with each breed having unique characteristics. Factory farms raise "genetically uniform" hogs that are all very similar in size, quality, and appearance. Most consumers prefer uniform hogs, since they get the same quality of meat every time

at the grocery meat counters. Factory hogs are raised in confinement buildings on concrete slats. They almost never see direct sunlight or touch the earth. The only exceptions to this maybe when they are transferred from birthing facilities to the nursery, then on to finishing facilities, and ultimately to the packing plant.

Different conditions for hogs require different management practices. Family farms combat disease and sickness with vaccines and medicine after the hogs have become sick. Due to the tight crowding and boredom, factory farm hogs often have more stress making them more susceptible to disease and sickness. To counter this problem, the hogs' feed is continuously laced with antibiotics. Factory farms also have to cut the tails off of the baby piglets to minimize tail biting in the crowded confinement conditions.

Perhaps the most controversial issue concerning hogs is their waste, which causes numerous environmental concerns. Family hog farms produce far less waste than factory farm hogs do. In general, family farms use the hog manure produced as fertilizer on their fields. Factory farms also do this, but there is much more manure produced on factory hog farms. In order for some factory farms to get rid of this waste, they sometimes over apply the manure on fields which causes environmental runoff problems. Before this manure is applied, it is kept in large man-made earthen or concrete lagoons that may leak into the ground water contaminating the local water supply. This is probably the number one fear of the people living around the factory farms.

People living closest to hog farms are also concerned about them for other reasons besides manure storage and disposal. They are worried about the smell of hog farms and the consequences of owning land near them. Family hog farms do smell, but their odor doesn't even compare to the potent odor of factory hog farms. The odor from factory hog

farms can sometimes be smelled from miles away. This concerns many land owners, because they fear that their homes will lose value due to the factory farm's proximity to them. This drives real estate values down, and the desire to live in the area is reduced.

Hog farms, however, can positively affect an area's economy. Both family farms and factory farms provide jobs for the area. Iowa, for instance, has 89,000 jobs that are directly or indirectly related to the hog industry. Family farms usually require one or two workers, while factory farms often require twenty to forty workers for each site! Factory farms are clearly advantageous to communities due to the number of jobs they provide. Factory farms can help add a great deal of labor income to a community. Factory farms also help to use more of an area's resources than family farms do. Family farms grow their own crops to feed to their hogs, but factory farms have to buy their feed. Factory farms require more feed, equipment, and building supplies than family farms. It is easy to understand that factory farms can positively affect the local economy.

Both family farms and factory farms clearly have their own advantages and disadvantages. Unfortunately, both systems of raising hogs compete against each other. Family farms cannot produce the large quantity of hogs needed to ship directly to the packer. Instead, they have to market their hogs through country purchasing points. The factory farm, on the other hand, produces a greater volume of hogs and can deliver directly to the packer under contract. By doing this, the factory farm receives premium prices, since the packer is assured that his slaughter lines will be full, and he knows when the hogs will be in. These contracts between the factory farms and packers have driven prices down. The factory farms have overproduced and often raise their hogs more cost

effectively due to the mass production. This has benefited the consumers, but has crippled the small family hog farmers.

The hog industry will continue to grow as long as people continue to eat their pork chops, BLT's, and sausage pizza. The trend will probably persist, and the number of factory farms will likely increase. Unfortunately, it might become even more difficult for the small family farms to survive. The family farms will continue to find that competing with big business is an uphill battle, and mass production for major profits is king.