Gov Perdue 1

**North Carolina governor asked to address hog industry’s health impacts**

By [Sue Sturgis](https://grist.org/author/sue-sturgis/) on Jul 15, 2009

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Environmental advocates gathered at the North Carolina legislature yesterday for a press conference and prayer vigil asking the governor to create a task force to study and take action on health problems associated with industrial hog farms.

The action came the same week new findings were published about the critical role hogs played in creating history’s deadliest flu, and the day after the Obama administration announced that it wanted to ban the routine use of antibiotics in farm animals in hopes of curbing the spread of dangerous bacterial infections that have been linked to hog farms and that kill 18,000 people a year in the U.S. — more than AIDS.

But North Carolina lawmakers’ reaction to the protest suggests it won’t be easy to win change in a state where Boss Hog rules.

On July 14, about 30 people gathered outside the North Carolina General Assembly in Raleigh to announce they had sent a letter to Gov. Beverly Perdue (D) asking her to convene a task force examining the environmental, human health and economic impacts of industrial production of swine and other livestock.

“We’re here today to elevate the concerns we have, outside the legislative building where people have the power to change things in our state,” said [Lower Neuse Riverkeeper](http://www.neuseriver.org/) Larry Baldwin.

Of particular concern is how the waste from these operations is handled — by piping it into what are known as “lagoons.” These stinking, open-air cesspools hold the animals’ feces and are frequently sited within smelling range people’s homes, schools and churches. They are concentrated in rural eastern North Carolina, part of the [Black Belt region](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Belt_%28U.S._region%29) with a high percentage of African-American residents.

“People are eating cheap because North Carolina communities are getting dumped on,” the [N.C. Environmental Justice Network’s](http://www.ncejn.org/) Naeema Muhammed said at the press conference. “It’s time for North Carolina officials to listen to the people. We must no longer be a sacrifice zone.”

Organizers handed out copies of the July 6 letter calling on Perdue to assemble the task force. Advocates see it as a way to bring together experts from different fields — public health, environment, economy, industry — to examine adverse health effects from CAFOs and consider replacing open-air lagoons with more advanced waste treatment technology. The letter states:

The issues that need to be addressed by the Task Force include, but should not be limited to, the areas of asthma, chronic respiratory conditions, methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) and now the swine flu (H1N1) and other emergent diseases. As a factor in our human health concerns, the Task Force also needs to address the issue of groundwater contamination, as many residents in close proximity to these facilities depend upon well water for their household uses. And finally, the impact that animal waste is having on water quality and fishery habitat will need to be addressed also, as this is both a health and economic concern.

The protest in Raleigh comes amidst growing attention to the link between hog farms and human disease.

This week, for example, the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences [published new findings](http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2009/07/10/0904991106.abstract) that hogs played a key role as what the [Associated Press called](http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5ginnOAz3pp-RLXDqh15hAAILoIWwD99DQOC00) “an influenza mixing bowl” in the pandemic of 1918, which killed an estimated 50 million people worldwide. Scientists studying the genetic origins of the flu found pieces of the 1918 virus had been circulating in hogs and humans as far as 15 years before the pandemic broke out and was not a more recent bird flu strain as previously thought.

Concerns have arisen during [the current H1N1 pandemic](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/) over the role CAFOs played in the strain’s development. There were [reports](http://www.southernstudies.org/2009/04/swine-flu-story-illuminates-disease-and-injustice-breeding-in-factory-farms-shadows.html) that the disease first emerged in a Mexican community where a subsidiary of Virginia-based Smithfield Farms operates massive hog farms, and scientists [reported](http://www.southernstudies.org/2009/05/swine-flu-genes-traced-to-north-carolina-hog-farm.html) tracing the virus’s genetic origins to a 1998 outbreak at an industrial hog facility in eastern North Carolina. [But as we have reported](http://www.southernstudies.org/2009/06/investigation-do-dirty-coal-plants-make-us-more-vulnerable-to-swine-flu.html), more recent research suggests the 1998 virus was not a direct predecessor to the current H1N1, and there is also evidence that the current strain was circulating in Mexico months before it was discovered near Smithfield’s operations.

**Federal government takes action**

In a recent [op ed](http://www.newsobserver.com/opinion/columns/story/1580707.html), epidemiologist Dr. Steve Wing with the University of North Carolina acknowledged that the role that industrial hog operations played in the current H1N1 pandemic is still unclear — but he also pointed out that their damaging impact on human health and the environment are well known and include air and water pollution as well as dangerous microbial contamination that can be spread by workers, birds and insects.

[His own research](http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=1440786) has found the likelihood of in-school exposure to air pollution from swine CAFOs in North Carolina is greater in schools with higher concentrations of low-income and nonwhite students.

At this week’s press conference, Wing spoke about how CAFOs contribute to the problem of antibiotic-resistant infections by routinely administering the drugs to animals to promote growth. Meanwhile, [recent research](http://www.gazetteonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090123/BUSINESS/701239937/1007) has found that hog farms are a source of a potentially deadly antibiotic-resistant staph infection that can be spread by consumers simply handling contaminated meat, with five out of 90 samples of retail pork in Louisiana testing positive for MRSA, [according to a recent study](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18978079).

“In North Carolina, migratory geese land on lagoons and become colonized with antibiotic-resistant bacteria, and can carry it great distances,” Wing said, adding that researchers in Maryland also discovered bacteria from  chicken farms in cars following livestock transport trucks on the roads.

The link between CAFOs and dangerous infections has gotten the federal government’s attention. On Monday, the U.S. House Rules Committee [held a hearing](http://www.rules.house.gov/PRArticle.aspx?NewsID=4380) on the [Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act](http://www.ucsusa.org/food_and_agriculture/solutions/wise_antibiotics/pamta.html), which would phase out the non-therapeutic use of certain antibiotics in animal agriculture. In written testimony, the Food and Drug Administration’s principal deputy commissioner, Dr. Joshua Sharfstein, expressed support for the legislation’s aims and also said farmers should not be allowed to use antibiotics in animals without veterinary supervision, the [New York Times reports](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/14/health/policy/14fda.html?bl&ex=1247630400&en=6309cd4459b68c1f&ei=5087%0A). The bill has the backing of the American Medical Association but is opposed by politically powerful farm organizations including the National Pork Producers Council.

But while the federal government is taking action to better regulate industrial livestock farms, North Carolina’s leaders do not appear to be ready yet to confront the health problems associated with the operations.

Following the press conference and a group prayer in which Halifax resident and [Concerned Citizens of Tillery](http://www.cct78.org/) member Claude Ford asked that “we might work together to get the job done,” the participants headed inside for a meeting of the state House Environment and Natural Resources Committee, where they expected to hear from [Dr. Jim Merchant](http://www.public-health.uiowa.edu/oeh/faculty/faculty-detail.asp?emailAddress=james-merchant@uiowa.edu), who had come all the way from Iowa to testify.

A UNC grad who teaches in the University of Iowa’s department of occupational and environmental health and is former dean of its College of Public Health, Merchant served on the [Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production](http://www.ncifap.org/), a joint project of The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. The Pew Commission studied CAFOs and recommended solutions to their myriad problems in its landmark report titled [“Putting Meat on the Table: Industrial Farm Animal Production in America.”](http://www.ncifap.org/reports/)

The protesters sat through an hour-long discussion about an unrelated matter to hear Merchant’s testimony — only to have the committee adjourn the hearing before giving him a chance to speak.

Don Webb of North Carolina’s Alliance for a Responsible Swine Industry said he was upset but not surprised.

“I can’t believe the rudeness and disrespect afforded a distinguished gentleman like Jim,” Webb said as lawmakers gathering up their things and filed out. “But I’m used to things like this happening in the General Assembly because of the power of pork.”

Indeed, a [recent report](http://www.democracy-nc.org/moneyresearch/2009/pacstaxbreaks.pdf) from the campaign finance watchdog group [Democracy North Carolina](http://www.democracy-nc.org/index.shtml) detailed that power in numbers, finding that  the N.C. Pork Council PAC contributed a total of $187,000 to state candidates during the last election cycle, while its political allies at the N.C. Farm Bureau PAC contributed another $222,150 — among the most generous and influential of all the state’s PACs.

But advocates are trying to counter pork power with people power: They’ve launched an [online petition](http://www.thepetitionsite.com/1/NCCAFOsandhealth) encouraging Gov. Perdue to launch the proposed task force on hog farms and are asking supporters to sign it.

“Here in the General Assembly they make laws that control what man can do,” Rick Dove of the [Waterkeeper Alliance](http://www.waterkeeper.org/) said as the hearing room emptied. “There are other laws that govern what nature does. And when man’s laws are in conflict with nature’s, we all lose.”

*(This report originally appeared at*[*Facing South*](http://www.southernstudies.org/2009/07/nc-governor-asked-to-address-hog-industrys-health-impacts.html)*.)*