

CFOs

Confined Feeding Operations

A Note on Risk

Paul Ebner and Yingying Hong

Purdue Animal Sciences

Series Publications

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The articles featured in this section (Current Research) focus on issues related to livestock production and its potential impact on human health. Concerns over these issues are sometimes voiced by neighbors and other members of the community when a new CFO is planned or proposed. Facing decisions as a policy maker regarding these issues, however, is difficult for a number of reasons. In some cases, the science may not be settled for a particular issue. In those cases, we have tried to provide a description of the “state of the research”, noting where there is consensus in some areas and explaining why there is still disagreement in others. This may be frustrating to the reader, but science is often many shades of gray before it is black and white. The difficulty in decision-making is compounded by the fact that there is very little information available for a policy maker in terms of effective protection or preventive measures for almost all issues described here. For instance, if antibiotic resistance is a concern, there is no specific research available to indicate that requiring a CFO be X number of feet from a neighboring residence will prove to be adequate or inadequate in alleviating this concern.

It is also important to talk about “risk”. Broadly defined, risk is the probability of something being lost. Almost all activities or actions involve some level of risk. There is risk in walking across the street. The risk is easily quantifiable, and measures can be taken to alleviate or minimize that risk (crosswalks, walk signals, looking both ways). In cases where science is unsettled, however, sometimes risk cannot be quantified. This can be compounded if the true preference is for zero risk. Countries have traditionally taken different approaches to decision making in the face of scientific uncertainties and unquantifiable risk. European countries have often applied what is called the precautionary principle in such cases. In adapting a precautionary principle, decisions may be made based

on what could happen, even if there is a lack of scientific consensus. In the United States, regulatory decisions regarding livestock production (and most other industries) have traditionally not used the precautionary principle, but have relied more on scientific consensus. Both are equally scientific and equally research based. They just use different processes for making decisions and approach risk differently.

Finally, the issues discussed here are not restricted to CFO-size farms ([follow this link for a definition of CFO](#)). While this site focuses on CFOs and concerns over the issues described here are regularly voiced in regard to CFOs, almost all issues addressed on this site do not discriminate based on the actual size of the farm. Using antibiotic resistance once again as an example, the issue is the same with a farm of 599 pigs and a farm with 600 pigs, which is the threshold number of pigs for a farm to be regulated as a CFO in Indiana. Moreover, not all farms use the same practices. Currently, many large CFOs do not use antibiotics at all or use them only to treat specific diseases. The potential impact these farms may have on antibiotic resistance could, in fact, be negligible



compared to a farm with far fewer animals but more frequent antibiotic use.

We will update this site as new information becomes available. In the meantime, however, we welcome any and all comments. We encourage you to contact us at pebner@purdue.edu if you would like any further information or clarifications.

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