

Hog study too rushed

On Oct. 21, Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food released the interim report of the Spirit Creek watershed monitoring committee (SCWMC) of the Rama and Hazel Dell area in east-central Saskatchewan.

According to the report, "The SCWMC (August 2000) is a totally independent and non-biased committee appointed by (Agriculture) Minister Clay Serby and re-appointed by Minister Mark Wartman to direct and communicate the monitoring of intensive hog development to ensure the sustainability of the environment in the Spirit Creek Watershed."

This committee, assisted by Dr. Huiqing Guo, assistant professor with the University of Saskatchewan's department of agriculture and bio-resource engineering, who co-ordinated odour monitoring; by Keith Head, agrologist with Head and Associates Ltd., who co-ordinated soils monitoring; and by two nasal rangers hired to take air-emission measurements at predetermined locations throughout the watershed, consisted of primarily area volunteer residents . . . and Florian Possberg, CEO of Big Sky Farms Inc.

For the first 18 to 24 months, they tested wells, dugouts, and spring run-off, took soil samples, recorded air quality, and set up a new weather station in the area as they collected data for a baseline before the hogs arrived. At the same time, Big Sky Farms began building the 6,000-sow breeder/farrowing barn, four nursery barns (capacity 19,200 animals), and the finisher barn (capacity 12,000 animals), located at three sites across this watershed, each with its own government-approved "earthen manure storage" — a seven-acre hole in the ground. They were completed by December 2000.

In February 2001, the first sows arrived, followed in August by the feeders. According to the report, this project produces 116,000 piglets per year (2,300 per week), as well as an estimated 20.5

million gallons of manure per year. This waste, using 50 million gallons of our drinking water, is flushed out of the barns into the cesspools before being spread, toxic and untreated, across the surrounding countryside.

The first "full-scale manure spreading" at the breeder and nursery barns was done in the fall of 2002 and at the finisher barn that spring. Collection of well and dugout water samples within two to three miles of each barn began in the fall of 2002, of odour samples in early 2003, and of post manure-spreading soil samples in 2003 and 2004.

Now, just over three years into Big Sky's full operation, the interim report has been released, with the full report to follow shortly.

Wait a minute! In the case of water pollution, it could take several years for possible bacteria, salts, heavy metals, antibiotic-resistant pathogens, etc., in the manure to move into our sources of drinking water and make people sick, or worse. Yet, the study is over!

What's the rush? Could it be an attempt to dismiss Robert Kennedy's recent remarks against corporate hog farms? Or, is it in response to the auditor general's 2005 report that indicates the federal departments of Agriculture and Environment do not know if programs are reducing the impacts of hog farming on the environment.

Unfortunately, any conclusions drawn from this report — this early in the operation of these mega hog barns — must be considered premature, misleading and potentially dangerous.

To be credible and truly address our concerns about the environment and our health, we need an independent study that would continue for at least another five years — then, give us an independent report.

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