

Hog operations deemed OK

By ANGELA HALL
Leader-Post

Large-scale hog operations in Saskatchewan aren't an environmental threat when existing regulations are followed, says the chairman of a citizens' group formed in 2000 amid hog barn controversy.

But the work of two hired "nasal rangers" and volunteer sniffers from the Rama area, northwest of Yorkton, did lead to a recommendation calling for more research on ways to control odour.

The Spirit Creek Watershed Monitoring Committee's interim report, released Friday, is part of a project that monitored water, air and soil in relation to hog barns.

The committee was struck five years ago by then-agriculture minister Clay Serby in response to public concerns about a multi-site Big Sky Farms hog project underway within the Spirit Creek watershed.

"We went in this to satisfy ourselves to a certain degree, but at the same time to find out if there was any problems," said Don Walters, chairman of the seven-member group. "I think after five years we found out that Saskatchewan is the place to develop livestock. Other than maybe some odour, we don't think there's a problem and you can have odour with any kind of development."

Walters, a cottage owner at Good

Online Extra

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Spirit Lake when the committee formed, said there was a "lot of doom and gloom" about potential environmental damage. "We felt it was beneficial to have a monitoring committee to tell a truly balanced, researched, scientific story of intensive livestock development."

The committee tested water sites, including dugouts, reservoirs and runoff sites, before and after liquid hog manure was injected into the land. The testing didn't raise concerns related to the hog barns, although it increased awareness among residents of the need to monitor well drinking water regardless of whether livestock operations are in the area, Walters said.

The committee recommends the province develop a program where residents could regularly have their water analysed at a low cost.

The report said soil samples taken before and after the hog barns went ahead showed levels of nitrogen and phosphorus increased in plots that received manure applications. The changes represent an improvement

in the fertility of the soils, it said.

As for odour, volunteer residents were trained to monitor smells during the study. Data indicated the number of "odour occurrences" declined to zero beyond a six-kilometre range of the swine facilities. Two trained odour sniffers called nasal rangers were also hired to identify odour at more than 100 locations from May to October 2003.

Swine odours were detected in about 16 per cent of all measurements. The report notes it was all in a downwind direction and some measurements were as close as 200 metres from the barns.

All data from the odour project will be reported by the end of the year, with the committee's final report due out next year.

Agriculture Minister Mark Wartman said the report could lead to greater acceptance of intensive livestock operations in Saskatchewan, which he called a natural fit for the province.

"The committee's interim report shows that we are managing our resources with respect to intensive livestock operations in an environmentally responsible manner."

But Elaine Hughes, an Archerwill resident who helped put off plans for a hog operation in her area, said concerns still exist. Hughes said the longer-term impact on water and soil needs to be considered and odours are still a major issue.