

SIX MILLION CHICKENS, ONE CORPORATE FARM, 150 WORKERS

Our neighbors at Parker are discussing still another proposal for a gigantic Confined Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) or factory farm, in the form of a chicken barn for 6 million laying hens that would employ 150 workers just outside Parker.

Sometimes these discussions are framed as pro- or anti-farm sentiments. Perhaps it might be re-framed as a question of what kind of agriculture, and what kind of egg production, we might choose as a society. I'm no mathematician, but the math is relatively simple.

The proposal at Parker is for 6 million laying hens on one corporate farm employing 150 workers. That is indeed a significant number of workers. But it also involves all the health and humane considerations of producing eggs in such confined quarters and such large numbers. It raises questions about where the feed comes from and where the wastes will go, as well as how the local community will benefit from the presence of one corporate farm headquartered in some far away city employing 150 local families.

So consider this alternative: 6 million chickens on 6,000 family farms. These are flocks of 1,000 laying hens that could presumably be kept in a more humane and healthy environment. They could provide partial support for 6,000 family farms scattered in many communities around the state, all of them contributing actively to the small towns and rural communities that make up the bulk of our rural state. These farms could feed their flocks from the crops of their fields, and the chicken manure would in turn easily nurture the crops that are being raised. It is part of a holistic agricultural economy based on the premise of many families living on the land that they own, and supporting the goods and services of the local communities where they live.

Or, here is still another alternative: 6 million chickens on 600,000 homes and yards. These are flocks of 10 laying hens owned by 600,000 rural and urban home dwellers. These

chickens thrive in spacious cages, perhaps they are even moved around the yard in free-range style. (What? Free lawn fertilizer?) They are virtually family pets, only more productive than cats and dogs, capable of providing the family with fresh eggs and the members of the family with the joy of caring for these creatures upon whose lives their own lives depend. Their manure can be composted into backyard gardens, and the feed they require can support nearby local farms, which also provide the other local food required by rural and urban folk alike. It's not so far-fetched when you learn how many rural and urban dwellers already keep just a few hens for their family's needs.

The point is, we need eggs! But there are alternatives to the proposal the Parker community is struggling with. It's our choice, as communities and as a society, and none of these options need to be mutually exclusive. But what kind of future would you choose? What kind of future will truly enable communities like Parker or Freeman to survive and thrive? Are CAFO's really the wave of the future, or the relic of an industrialized agriculture's past? As for me, I'm going to keep buying my eggs laid by free range chickens from local farmers, even though they do cost more!

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