

The Urgent Case for a Moratorium on Mega-Dairies in New Mexico

Mega-dairies^a took over the New Mexican landscape over the past few decades. With them came numerous externalities, from air pollution to contaminated drinking water to environmental injustice. Regulations are failing to curb this pollution. It is time to enact a moratorium on all new mega-dairies and the expansion of existing ones.

How a stretch of interstate in southeast New Mexico became “Dairy Row”

The U.S. dairy industry underwent significant changes in recent decades. Farms became fewer but larger, driven by low price margins and cheap grain for feed. Cooperatives consolidated and gained control over larger geographical areas, and shifted to producing more products like cheese that serve regional or national markets. This meant that dairies no longer had to be located near urban populations or traditional dairy regions like the Northeast or Midwest. In fact, the majority of growth in the dairy industry occurred in western states like New Mexico, where a favorable climate and affordable land allowed dairies to raise ever-increasing herds on factory farms.¹

Today dairy is New Mexico’s largest agricultural sector.³ The state also has some of the largest herds, with the average mega-dairy confining more than 3,000 head of cows. Nearly all of this growth occurred in just five southern counties, including Doña Ana, where the infamous stretch of mega-dairies along I-10 from Las Cruces to El Paso, Texas earned the nickname “Dairy Row” (see Table 1).⁴

Mega-dairies and the dairy crisis

U.S. milk production has increased faster than consumer demand, due in part to mega-dairy expansion, technologies like growth hormones that increase milk production, and lack of federal supply management. Overproduction drives down the prices farmers receive for their milk.⁵ The average U.S. dairy today cannot even meet the cost of production.⁶ These economic hardships hit smaller, family-scale dairies the hardest. They face pressure to expand their herds or exit dairy farming altogether.⁷ For instance, New Mexico has about half as many small dairies (under 500 head) today compared to 20 years ago.⁸

Table 1. Top Five New Mexico Counties for Number of Cows on Mega-Dairies² (2017)

County	Dairy Cows on Factory Farms	Annual Manure Production (in lbs.)	Human Sewage Equivalency (in number of residents)
Chaves County	82,993	3,418,414,378	2,517,613
Curry County	79,324	3,267,296,924	2,406,317
Roosevelt County	64,634	2,662,241,939	1,960,703
Lea County	33,963	1,398,908,432	1,030,276
Doña Ana County	32,050	1,320,113,514	972,244
Total New Mexico	335,562	13,821,526,703	10,179,354

^a The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s definition of a large dairy concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO) includes those with 700 or more dairy cows confined for at least 45 days per year, on operations that lack cropland or pasture. A medium dairy CAFO confines 200-699 cows and discharges waste into surface waters. (See 40 CFR § 122.23.) In this piece, mega-dairies refer to operations with 500 or more cows, as this corresponds with data categories in the 2017 U.S. Department of Agriculture Census of Agriculture, which do not provide information on confinement and waste management.

“Are we ‘real citizens’ or not?”

New Mexico’s dairy industry generates more than a billion dollars of sales each year.⁹ Yet this revenue is not necessarily benefitting the local communities plagued by mega-dairies. Mega-dairies often purchase feed and other inputs outside of the local community while benefitting from tax breaks that deprive local coffers of revenue; they also offload infrastructure, environmental and public health costs onto local communities. Additionally, mega-dairies can reduce property values of nearby homes. Decades of research uphold that mega-dairies and other factory farms “are fundamentally incompatible with rural regional economic development,” and are linked to higher levels of unemployment and poverty.¹⁰

On top of this, fenceline communities bear the brunt of mega-dairy pollution. Flies and foul odors prevent residents from spending time outdoors or even opening their windows.¹¹ The odors are not just a nuisance, but a mix of toxic pollutants that contribute to health issues including headaches, fatigue and asthma.¹² Mega-dairies also emit greenhouse gases, like methane and nitrous oxide, that fuel the climate crisis.¹³

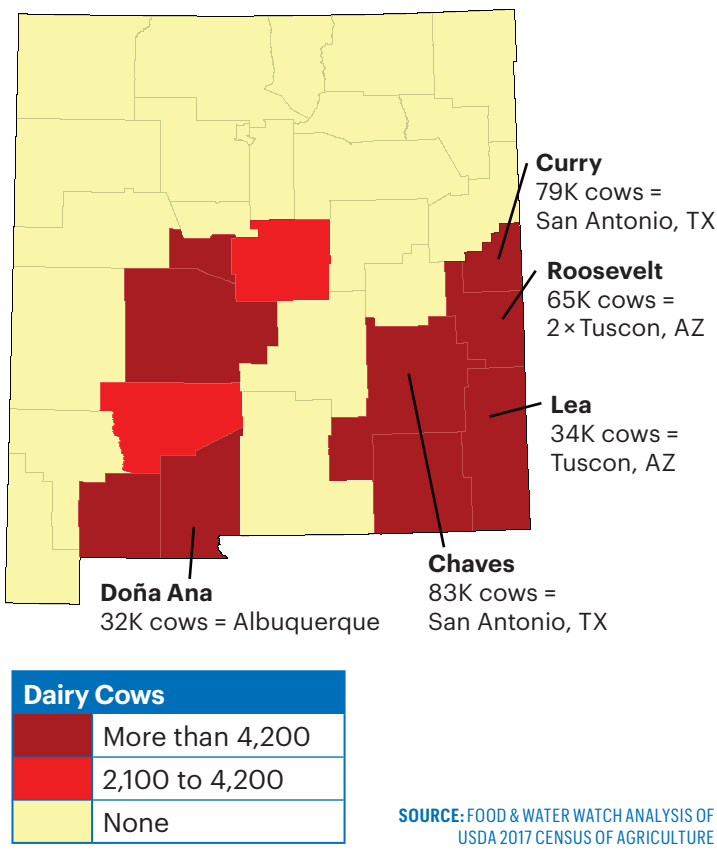
Many of these fenceline communities are low-income areas and/or communities of color, making mega-dairies an environmental justice issue. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Anthony—a community along Dairy Row—is more than 98 percent Hispanic or Latino, and nearly half of its residents are living in poverty.¹⁴ Despite New Mexico’s 2006 executive order requiring agencies to consider disproportionate impacts when permitting industrial operations like mega-dairies, the policy is “more sentiment than substance.”¹⁵ Fenceline community members testify feeling as though they have “no political standing” to push back against the dairy industry, and frustration towards regulators for failing to protect them. One resident asked pointedly, “Are we ‘real citizens’ or not?”¹⁶

Mega-dairies exacerbate New Mexico’s water crisis

Dairy cows produce more manure than any other livestock raised on factory farms. Together, the cows living on New Mexico’s mega-dairies produce enough manure to overflow nine Olympic swimming pools each day. That is 11 times as much sewage produced by the Albuquerque metropolitan area (see Figure 1).¹⁷

Smaller dairies can sustainably apply manure to surrounding cropland as fertilizer. But many of New Mexico’s mega-dairies are “dry-lot” operations, confining cows on barren soil that becomes a “mashed mess of urine and manure.” Eighty percent have half the amount of land needed to absorb manure nutrients. Nevertheless, land application remains a common method for offloading mega-dairy manure waste. Excess nutrients can run off into surface water, creating a slew of problems including harmful algal blooms and fish kills. Mega-dairies also pollute groundwater, the source of drinking water for the majority of New Mexicans.¹⁹ Elevated levels of nitrate in drinking water are linked to health problems, including cancer and the life-threatening condition called blue-baby syndrome.²⁰

FIG. 1. NM Factory Dairy Farm Counties Produce as Much Waste as Metropolitan Areas¹⁸



Mega-dairies also consume enormous amounts of water — both in watering cows, and in cleaning and cooling milk parlor equipment. One study estimated the average water footprint per cow at 30 gallons per day.²¹ By that estimate, New Mexico’s mega-dairies together consume 10 million gallons of water each day — equal to 15 Olympic-sized swimming pools.²²

Mega-dairies and farmworker justice

Jobs on mega-dairies are “some of the most difficult, dangerous and abusive” in the state, according to the New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty.²³ The majority of dairy workers labor at least six days a week, and half work longer than eight hours per shift. Moreover, agricultural labor law exemptions intended to aid family farms are exploited by mega-dairies, allowing them to pay below minimum wage, deny overtime pay and circumvent oversight from the U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Bureau (OSHA).²⁴

Animal agriculture remains one of the most dangerous occupations, yet three-quarters of New Mexico dairies do not provide any sort of safety training. More than half of New Mexico’s dairy workers have reported being injured the job. But workers often avoid speaking about poor working conditions out for fear of retaliation.²⁵

We cannot regulate our way out of this

A 2009 analysis by the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) found that two-thirds of the state’s dairies were contaminating groundwater. Following pressure by concerned citizen groups, the NMED issued a series of regulations — called the “dairy rule” — that require manure lagoon liners and quarterly groundwater testing.²⁶ However, 10 years later, the majority of monitoring wells along Dairy Row continue to have elevated levels of contaminants.²⁷

A decade of regulations has failed to stop mega-dairy pollution. It is time for a moratorium on all new mega-dairies, and on the expansion of existing ones. We also need common-sense policy reform, including:

- Amending labor laws to increase pay and workplace safety for dairy laborers;
- Funding to support mega-dairies in transitioning to smaller, more sustainable operations serving regional food hubs; and
- Enacting federal supply management for dairy, to provide a level playing field for family-scale dairies.

Endnotes

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