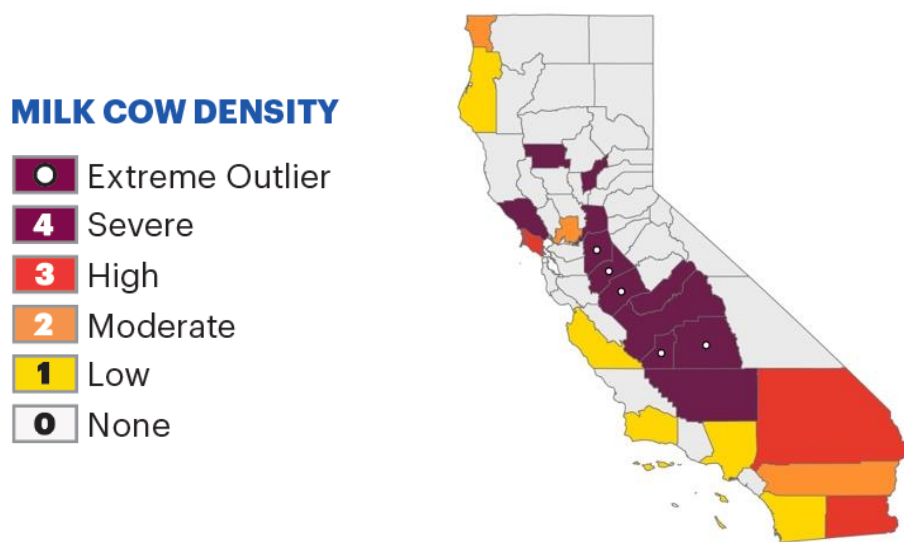


Factory Farm Nation: California's Mega-Dairy Problem

California's factory dairy farms are getting larger, producing extraordinary amounts of manure waste. This manure is typically not treated before being dumped into the environment, where it fouls rivers and streams, pollutes drinking water, and fuels climate change.

Meanwhile, state and federal policies and incentives continue to prop up Big Ag's factory farm model at the expense of family-scale operations, which are collapsing in alarming numbers. California must ban new factory farms and the expansion of existing ones, and revamp farm policies to build a food system that works for everyone.

Milk Cows on California's Mega-Dairies



Source: Food & Water Watch analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture

California's Mega-Dairies Fuel Environmental Injustice and Climate Change

In 2022, California had 1.7 million milk cows living on mega-dairies.¹ This is more than any other state, and more than twice as much as the number two state, Wisconsin. Together, California's mega-dairies produce 68.3 billion pounds of manure each year — 1.3 times as much as the state's entire human population. This is enough manure to fill 45 Olympic-sized swimming pools *each day*. Untreated factory farm manure is often spread on farmland, and surplus manure can create runoff that pollutes soil and water.²

Moreover, mega-dairy manure is often first stored in liquid lagoons, which can release significant amounts of methane, a powerful greenhouse gas.³ Mega-dairies release additional hazardous pollutants like ammonia and nitrogen oxides that worsen air quality for nearby residents. These factory farms have long been disproportionately located in low-income and non-white areas. For instance, the San Joaquin Valley — which houses 90 percent of California's dairy cows — has a higher ratio of Latinx residents compared to the state as a whole.⁴ In addition to these health hazards, residents near mega-dairies and other factory farms report foul odors and flies that keep them from enjoying the outdoors or even opening their windows.⁵

Mega-dairies compete for water resources at a time when thousands of California's domestic water wells are running dry, and over a million Californians do not have access to safe drinking water.⁶ Food & Water Watch estimates that California's mega-dairies require 152 million gallons of water each day just to water and wash cows and buildings. This is more than enough to meet the indoor water needs for the entire San Diego metropolitan area. This does not include the water needed to move manure into storage systems, or to produce animal feed, which encompasses the largest water footprint for milk production.

California Is Bleeding Family-Scale Dairies

Nowhere is the shift from family-scale to factory operations more apparent than in the dairy industry, where consolidation occurred at a faster pace than in almost every other agricultural sector.⁷ Smaller, family-scale farms are struggling to stay afloat. California reported roughly half as many family-scale dairies in 2022 compared to just 2017. This harms rural communities, with the rise in factory farms linked to a host of social and economic declines, from higher poverty rates to out-migration.⁸

We Can Fix Our Factory Farm Problem

We need a complete overhaul of our federal farm policies so that they work for farmers and consumers — not agribusiness giants — while reducing livestock's climate footprint. This must include:

- An immediate, national ban on new factory farms and on the expansion of existing ones;
- Research and funding to help current factory farms transition to smaller, more sustainable crop and/or livestock systems; and
- Investment to expand local markets and build the infrastructure needed to help farmers bring their products to market.

While we work toward these goals, California must take immediate action by enacting a moratorium on new and expanding factory farms, and stopping the expansion of industry scams like factory farm gas that only further entrench the factory farm model.

Endnotes

- 1 For methodology, see Food & Water Watch (FWW), "Factory Farm Nation: 2024 Edition." September 2024.
- 2 Graham, Jay P. and Keeve E. Nachman. "Managing waste from confined animal feeding operations in the United States: The need for sanitary reform." *Journal of Water and Health*. Vol. 8, No. 4. December 2010 at 649 to 651 and 654; Yang, Qichun et al. "Spatiotemporal patterns of livestock manure nutrient production in the conterminous United States from 1930 to 2012." *Science of the Total Environment*. October 2015 at 14 to 20.
- 3 See FWW. "Factory Farms, Fracking, and the Methane Emergency." July 2024.
- 4 Katz, Jamie et al. "Leadership Council for Justice and Accountability, Central Valley Defenders for Clean Water & Air, Animal Legal Defense Fund, and Food & Water Watch Comments on Proposed Amendments to the Low Carbon Fuel Standard." Submitted to the California Air Resources Board. February 20, 2023 at 2 to 4. Available at https://www.arb.ca.gov/lispub/comm/iframe_bccomdisp.php?listname=lcfs2024&comment_num=7060&virt_num=; Gittelsohn, Phoebe et al. "The false promise of biogas: Why biogas is an environmental justice issue." *Environmental Justice*. Vol. 15, No. 6. 2022 at 356.
- 5 Katz et al. at 7; Weida, William J. The Colorado College. "A synopsis of potential impacts from dairies on a regional economy." March 2003 at 1 to 2; Border 2012 Texas-New Mexico-Chihuahua Regional Work Group Public Meeting. Minutes. Anthony, New Mexico. November 4, 2010 at 2 to 3.
- 6 FWW. "Fighting for the Human Right to Water in Tombstone Territory, California." March 2023 at introduction.
- 7 MacDonald, James M. et al. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Economic Research Service. "Consolidation in U.S. Dairy Farming." Economic Research Report No. 274. July 2020 at 11.
- 8 Lobao, Linda and Curtis W. Stofferahn. "The community effects of industrialized farming: Social science research and challenges to corporate farming laws." *Agriculture and Human Values*. Vol. 25, Iss. 2. June 2008 at 220 to 221 and 225; Durrenberger, E. Paul and Kendall M. Thu. "The expansion of large scale hog farming in Iowa: The applicability of Goldschmidt's findings fifty years later." *Human Organization*. Vol. 55, No. 4. Winter 1996 at 411 to 412; Lyson, Thomas A. and Rick Welsh. "Agricultural industrialization, anticorporate farming laws, and rural community welfare." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*. Vol. 37, Iss. 8. August 1, 2005 at 1487 to 1488.