

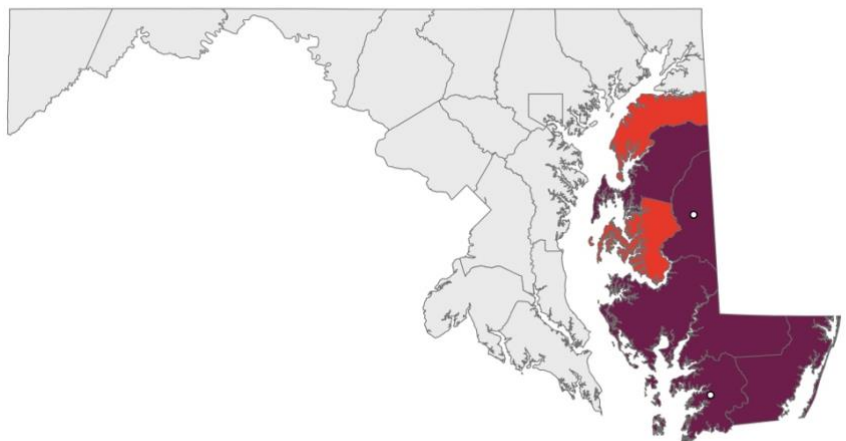
# Factory Farm Nation: Maryland's Factory Farm Problem

Maryland's factory chicken operations are getting larger and continue to produce extraordinary amounts of litter. Chicken litter is typically not treated before being dumped into the environment, where it fouls rivers and streams, pollutes drinking water, and fuels climate change.

Meanwhile, Maryland 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. Maryland must ban new factory farms and the expansion of existing ones, and revamp farm policies to build a food system that works for everyone.

## Broiler Chickens on Maryland's Factory Farms

### BROILER CHICKEN DENSITY



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

## Maryland's Chicken Farms Pollute the Air and Abuse Farmers

In 2022, at any given time, Maryland confined 36 million broiler (meat) chickens on factory farms.<sup>1</sup> This is nearly 40 percent more than in 2002. And Maryland's factory chicken operations are getting even larger, with the average operation confining 179,000 birds at a time.

Maryland's factory chicken farms produce enormous volumes of poultry litter (a mixture of manure, feathers, and bedding).<sup>2</sup> In 2022, they generated an estimated 548 million pounds of poultry litter. The manure content alone was enough to fill an Olympic-sized swimming pool *each day*. Poultry litter is high in nitrogen and phosphorus, and its overapplication on fields can contaminate groundwater, thereby polluting drinking water sources. Elevated levels of nitrate in drinking water

are linked to the life-threatening condition known as “blue baby syndrome.”<sup>3</sup> Additionally, agriculture is the leading human-caused source of nitrogen and phosphorus pollution in the Chesapeake Bay.<sup>4</sup> Poultry litter contributes to this load, impeding efforts to restore this important estuary.<sup>5</sup>

Chicken farming is heavily concentrated on Maryland's Eastern Shore, where communities live near factory farms housing hundreds of thousands of birds at a time. Factory chicken farms make bad neighbors, releasing foul odors that invade nearby homes and schools, even with the windows closed.<sup>6</sup> They also release a slew of toxic pollutants — including ammonia, particulate matter, and endotoxins — which irritate the respiratory system and are linked to lung disease. Poultry houses also spread human pathogens and create volatile organic compounds that can harm the nervous system and contribute to toxic ground-level ozone.<sup>7</sup>

The extreme concentration of factory farms in a region is all part of the poultry industry's business model. Ninety-six percent of broiler chickens sold in the U.S. are raised under production contracts.<sup>8</sup> In these systems, growers do not own the birds but instead raise them under contract with agribusinesses like Perdue and Tysons (the integrators), which lower costs by contracting with multiple growers in the same region.<sup>9</sup> Agribusinesses shift many of the risks involved in raising chickens (as well as the burden of litter disposal) onto the shoulders of growers.<sup>10</sup> Integrators are able to offer such one-sided contracts in part because of extreme market consolidation, with limited numbers of integrators working with growers. Walking away is not necessarily an option when growers accrue massive debt to keep up with contract requirements.<sup>11</sup>

## 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, Maryland must take immediate action by enacting a moratorium on new and expanding factory farms. Maryland must also hold poultry companies accountable for continuing to pollute the Chesapeake Bay with manure runoff, and stop 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 MacDonald, James M. U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Economic Research Service (ERS). "Technology, Organization, and Financial Performance in U.S. Broiler Production." Economic Information Bulletin Number 126. June 2014 at 1 and 23.
- 3 *Ibid.*; Davis, Michael A. et al. "Poultry manure as a fertilizer." University of Florida Extension. Reviewed January 2017; Swistock, Bryan. PennState Extension. "Nitrates in drinking water." 2019 at 1.
- 4 Chesapeake Bay Program. 2025 Watershed Implementation Plans (WIPs). Available at <https://www.chesapeakeprogress.com/clean-water/watershed-implementation-plans>. Accessed May 2024 and on file with FWW.
- 5 Amato, Heather K. et al. "Effects of concentrated poultry operations and cropland manure application on antibiotic resistant *Escherichia coli* and nutrient pollution in Chesapeake Bay Watersheds." *Science of the Total Environment*. Vol. 735. September 2020 at abstract.
- 6 Fairchild, B. D. et al. "Ammonia concentrations downstream of broiler operations." *The Journal of Applied Poultry Research*. Vol. 18, Iss. 3. Fall 2009 at 631, 634 and 636; Baykov, Bayko and Michail Stoyanov. "Microbial air pollution caused by intensive broiler chicken breeding." *FEMS Microbiology Ecology*. Vol. 29. 1999 at 390 to 391; Dance, Scott. "As chicken industry booms, Eastern Shore farmers face not-in-my-backyard activism." *Baltimore Sun*. April 2, 2016.
- 7 Kirychuk, S. P. et al. "Total dust and endotoxin in poultry operations: Comparison between cage and floor housing and respiratory effects in workers." *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*. Vol. 48, No. 7. July 2006 at 741 and 745; Trabue, Steven et al. "Speciation of volatile organic compounds from poultry production." *Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering*. Vol. 44, Iss. 29. September 2010 at 3545 to 3546; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Office of Inspector General. "Eleven Years After Agreement, EPA Has Not Developed Reliable Emission Estimation Methods to Determine Whether Animal Feeding Operations Comply With Clean Air Act and Other Statutes." Report No. 17-P-0396. September 19, 2017 at 2.
- 8 FWW analysis of USDA. National Agricultural Statistics Service. Quick Stats. Available at <https://quickstats.nass.usda.gov>. Accessed May 2024.
- 9 MacDonald (2014) at 1; Key, Nigel and James M. MacDonald. USDA ERS. "Local Monopsony Power in the Market for Broilers? Evidence From a Farm Survey." Selected Paper at the Annual Meeting of the Agricultural & Applied Economics Association. Orlando, FL. July 27-29, 2008 at 3.
- 10 MacDonald (2014) at 23, 26 to 27, and 31; Moodie, Alison. "Fowl play: The chicken farmers being bullied by big poultry." *Guardian*. April 22, 2017.
- 11 Key and MacDonald (2008) at 3 to 4 and 7; Moodie (2017).