

Ohio Environmental Stewardship Alliance

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 27, 2009

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NEW STATEWIDE CITIZENS ALLIANCE FORMED TO PUSH FOR REFORM OF LIVESTOCK INDUSTRY IN OHIO

*Group Claims Current Ohio Law Facilitates Agri-Business
And Fails to Protect Ohio Citizens*

Columbus, OH – Citizens’ groups from across Ohio have formed a new organization – the **Ohio Environmental Stewardship Alliance** – to reform Ohio’s system for regulating livestock facilities. The Alliance represents the unification of dozens of grassroots groups that have formed in communities where thousands of cattle and hogs, or millions of chickens, have impaired the local environment and degraded the communities’ quality of life.

The Ohio Department of Agriculture (ODA) requires permits for the largest livestock operations known as Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), while numerous other confined livestock operations, sized just beneath the permitting threshold, are subject only to voluntary guidelines. The ODA’s CAFO permitting authority was adopted in 2001 with enthusiastic support by agribusiness lobbies.

Although the ODA touts the rigors of its permitting program as the best in the U.S., a recent report from the University of Nebraska compared the stringency of permitting programs among the nation’s top ten hog producing states. They rated Ohio’s program as the least stringent of the ten. Meanwhile, Ohio Environmental Protection Agency’s (OEPA’s) TMDL (Total Maximum Daily Load) data from intensive livestock areas confirms the first-hand experience of many rural residents - that current regulatory measures are insufficient to protect environmental quality.

The Ohio Environmental Stewardship Alliance believes that the interests of Ohio citizens in a clean environment and a good rural quality of life have taken a back seat to corporate agribusiness interests for too long. Citizens have organized the Alliance to restore balance to Ohio’s regulatory system.

“Virtually all industries seek to avoid regulation but industrial livestock operations have been exceptionally successful in that regard,” said Joe Logan, a spokesperson for the group. “The end result has been the continued deterioration of water quality in agricultural watersheds, languishing rural economies and quality of life that often includes oppressive odors, flies, and depressed property values. These detrimental impacts can no longer be ignored.”

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The impacts of industrial livestock production reach far from Ohio's rural areas to affect nearly all Ohioans. There is solid evidence that the millions of tons of animal manure produced on Ohio's confined livestock facilities are degrading water quality in many watersheds across the state. Logan explained that the current regulatory system is based on the belief that massive amounts of manure can be spread on crop fields, which in turn will absorb 100% of the nutrients and pathogens 100% of the time. TMDL Studies conducted by the Ohio EPA during the past decade has proven this assumption wrong, as many of Ohio's most highly impaired watersheds (Stillwater, Wabash, and Maumee) are home to intensive livestock production. One need look no further than Grand Lake St. Mary or Lake Erie's western basin to confirm these concerns.

The Ohio Environmental Stewardship Alliance has adopted an ambitious agenda for reform that starts with education and ends with political action at the federal and state levels. The group intends to press administrative and legislative leaders at the state and federal levels to strengthen regulatory controls over factory farms, restoring balance and accountability to the programs.

One of the Alliance's first objectives will be to oppose a legislative initiative supported by both the ODA and the agri-business lobbies. This legislation aims to remove Ohio EPA's last remaining authority over pollution discharges from factory farms, transferring this important safeguard to ODA. As the Environmental Integrity Project has documented however, Ohio EPA has historically been more aggressive at enforcement actions for pollution violations from factory farms than the ODA. This transfer of authority to administer the National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) may soon be considered in the Ohio General Assembly.

"We view this proposed transfer as a serious step in the wrong direction and strongly urge legislators to oppose it. We will view votes on this bill as defining indicators of commitment by the legislature and the Governor to a clean environment and a healthy rural quality of life. Their stance on this bill will serve as their moment of accountability," said Logan.

The Alliance also believes that Ohio's rural communities could better protect their own public health and economic vitality if their traditional authority for local governance were restored. "Unfortunately, their long-standing authority has been stripped away by the Ohio General Assembly. Now, local community leadership, including public health authorities, find themselves powerless in the face of wealthy agri-business corporations who may decide to place massive industrial livestock facilities in their midst," Logan explained. The Alliance will seek statutory changes to restore the authority of local boards of health to address concerns associated with these facilities.

Logan summed up the strong conviction of the Alliance's supporters to reform Ohio's livestock regulations by stating "We represent the long overdue citizen push-back to decades of political dominance by corporate agribusiness interests."

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