

Study finds health departments hindered in addressing health concerns from animal production sites

February 4 2013

State and local health departments face significant barriers and usually do not get involved when confronted with public health concerns resulting from food animal production sites, according to a new study led by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future at the Bloomberg School of Public Health.

The authors of the study, published in [PLOS ONE](#), an open-access publisher of scientific research, examined the role of local and state [health departments](#) in responding to and preventing community-driven concerns associated with animal production sites. This study developed when it was brought to the attention of two of the authors that community members may assume that local health departments actively monitor and address potential concerns arising from large animal production sites. Prior experience of the authors indicated that this perception might be misinformed.

For the study, "Investigating the Role of State and Local Health Departments in Addressing [Public Health](#) Concerns Related to Industrial Food Animal Production Sites," researchers interviewed officials representing 13 county and eight state health departments and community leaders. Survey participants were selected in areas with high densities or rapid growth of large [swine production](#) sites. Researchers asked participants a series of questions in an effort to find out what health and environmental concerns are reported to health departments,

how the health departments respond, and to determine barriers that may prevent increased involvement.

Past studies have shown air near animal production sites to contain [hydrogen sulfide](#), [particulate matter](#), and [allergens](#). Exposure to these emissions has been associated with multiple respiratory, cardiovascular and neurological health problems. Health department employees surveyed told investigators that, although some are often contacted by concerned community members living in close proximity to animal production sites, limited staff resources, lack of expertise or training, jurisdictional issues, and political pressures can hinder follow-up.

"Even though health departments are charged with monitoring and responding to the public health concerns of a community, most interviewed for the study said they had no involvement in decisions made about animal production sites," said Jillian Fry, PhD, lead author of the study. Primary regulatory authority over animal production sites, according to a report by the National Council of State Legislatures, frequently falls within the departments of the Environment or Natural Resources. "We believe formal involvement by state and local health departments may better protect the health of individuals in the community," said Fry.

Political and economic pressures were frequently cited as barriers to health departments becoming involved. Similarly, the researchers heard from participants that efforts to establish ordinances regulating animal production sites are often hindered by economic and political power held by agricultural corporations. As a result of the lack of health department involvement with concerns regarding animal production sites, community members surveyed noted they were, in essence, attempting to fill the role of health departments by performing environmental monitoring, and educating and informing the community. Community members said they often sought help and information from other

government agencies, researchers, and other groups—on a national or state level—to answer questions about animal production health concerns.

Community members surveyed said engaging a health department about animal production concerns had never led to a resolution. "Health departments generally don't get involved," noted Fry. "When they do, our study found that usually no action is ultimately taken to correct a potentially serious threat to public health." Community leaders contacted in the study unanimously supported an expanded role for health departments to become involved in animal production, equal to that of other state and local agencies. Health departments could be involved with animal production sites through assessment, education, outreach, monitoring, and participating in permitting decisions.

"We believe it is critical for affected communities, health care providers, policymakers, and public health professionals to be aware of the limited engagement on this issue by health departments," said Fry. "Health departments could play a more significant role in addressing community members' health concerns if resources and the political landscape changed."

Fry and the study's coauthors believe health departments with animal production sites in their county or state should be provided with training, educational materials, and additional funding to increase their understanding of the human health concerns surrounding animal agriculture. "Even with these additional resources, or a change in jurisdictional authority, political barriers will likely continue to be a significant challenge to fully addressing animal production and public health."

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public

Health

Citation: Study finds health departments hindered in addressing health concerns from animal production sites (2013, February 4) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-02-health-departments-hindered-animal-production.html>

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