



*'With five Democratic candidate hopefuls taking an early stand for family farmers, rural communities, and the environment, now's the time for the entire field of presidential hopefuls to follow suit.'* (photo: Elijah Nouvelage/Reuters)

## **The Secret to Democrats Winning the Midwest: Fight Big Agriculture**

By George Goehl, Guardian UK 05 September 19

*Factory farming sucks up money and pollutes rural communities in swing states like Iowa*

**N**ot since the Rev Jesse Jackson's candidacy for the Democratic nomination in 1988 have we seen presidential hopefuls so fiercely and consistently bring the issues facing family farmers into the national conversation. This year, five candidates for the Democratic nomination say they [support a ban](#) on factory farms.

As we know, Jackson didn't win the nomination. Michael Dukakis did, but he lost the general election, and four years later Bill Clinton became president. Under Clinton's leadership, Democrats joined Republicans in advancing an agenda of deregulation and privatization that favored big corporations over everyday people.

This didn't go well for workers – and it was disastrous for many farmers.

“The 1996 Farm Bill stripped away the last remnants of farm programs that used to ensure farmers were paid fairly in the marketplace by managing production and setting price floors,” Ben Lilliston, the director of rural strategies and climate change at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, told me.

Immediately after the so-called “Freedom to Farm Bill” passed, farm prices plunged, and farmers scrambled to stay on their land. In much the same way Nafta played workers from multiple countries against each other, the Farm Bill drove down how much farmers were able to

get for their goods – furthering consolidation, and furthering a factory farm boom.

The good news is that the battle for the heart and soul of today’s Democratic Party is on, with forces ready to rein in abusive corporate actors gaining momentum. One sign of that shift: five Democrats running for president – Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Julian Castro, Tulsi Gabbard, and Marianne Williamson – have come out in support of a ban on the expansion of factory farms. These Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) are usually massive industrial livestock operations that pollute the air and water and ruin the quality of life for people who live close to them.

Warren and Castro clarified their position in response to a candidate questionnaire from the Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement Action Fund, the largest grassroots organization in the state. Sanders had already declared his position on his campaign website.

Taking a stand on factory farms is the right thing to do. It’s also good politics. Unless, of course, your path to the Oval Office is dependent on contributions from corporate agriculture.

“Factory farms profit at the expense of rural communities, displacing family farmers, bypassing main street businesses, and polluting the air and groundwater,” Bobby King told me. King works with the Land Stewardship Action Fund, a Minnesota-based farm and rural organization. “Rural people experience this directly. Candidates that have the courage to stand up to corporate agriculture will connect with and inspire rural people as they head into the ballot box.”

Factory farms are far from popular. In exit polling from the midterm elections, 73% of Iowa voters said the governor and legislature should require limits to [manure pollution runoff](#) into Iowa’s waterways. It’s not surprising. Iowa is home to 3 million people, and 26 million hogs,

which create the waste equivalent of 65 million people.

That waste, full of dangerous nitrate, makes its way into Iowa’s waterways. 750 waterways in Iowa are [currently affected](#). It’s why the City of Des Moines is operating the largest nitrate removal system in the entire world.

“Enough is enough,” Cherie Mortice, of Iowa CCI Action Fund, told me. “We’ve got 10,000 factory farms in Iowa. That’s too many corporate hogs and way too much corporate hog manure.”

From an electoral college perspective, four of the ten states with the greatest concentration of CAFOs are swing states: Iowa, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Wisconsin. As we learned in 2016, rural voters could make all the difference. The greatest concentration of counties that swung from President Obama to Donald Trump are along the Mississippi River in three midwestern swing states: Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

People’s Action, the organization I direct, recently completed 10,000 conversations with people in rural communities. Clean water, or the lack of it, consistently came up as a top issue. More often than not, polluted water was a result of CAFOs or pesticide run-off from corporate agricultural practices.

While taking a stand against these polluting entities would seem a no-brainer, corporate agriculture is a powerful lobby, and puts incredible sums of money into elections and lobbying.

With five Democratic candidate hopefuls taking an early stand for family farmers, rural communities, and the environment, now’s the time for the entire field of presidential hopefuls to follow suit. This will send a message to voters and to corporate agriculture. It also is another shot across the bow within the Democratic Party, pushing the party toward a vision that definitively puts workers, family farmers, and the environment, not extractive corporations, first.