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FEATURED

Groups petition Oregon to regulate dairy air emissions

By GEORGE PLAVEN Capital Press
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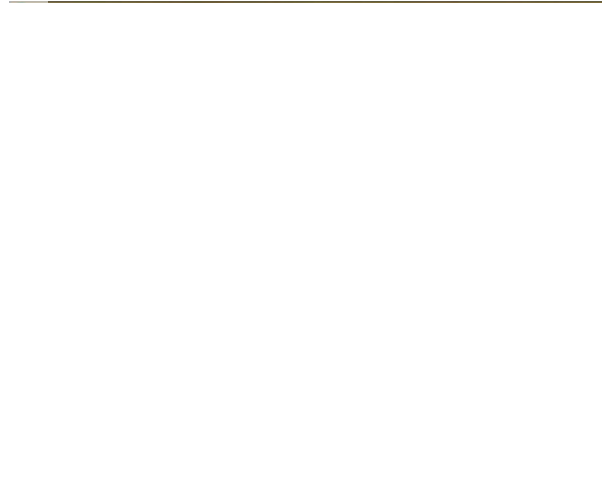


Threemile Canyon Farms milks 33,000 cows.
Threemile Canyon Farms

SALEM — A coalition of 22 environmental, public health and animal welfare groups is petitioning Oregon regulators to adopt new rules targeting air pollution from large-scale dairies.

The petition, filed Aug. 17 with the state Environmental Quality Commission, seeks to create a dairy air emissions program that would apply to farms with 700 or more mature cows, which the federal Environmental Protection Agency defines as a "large" operation.

Under the program, proposed and existing dairies would be required to obtain an air quality permit and curb harmful emissions. They include ammonia, methane, hydrogen sulfide and particulate matter, among others.



Opponents argue the proposal is misleading, and would include family farms that can ill afford more costly regulations.

Emily Miller, staff attorney for Food and Water Watch, estimated the proposal would apply to 91 dairies in Oregon. That is 39% of all Grade A dairies and have 84% of all cows.

"For too long, the state has sat idly by while Oregon mega-dairies have been spewing toxic pollution into the air, wreaking havoc on our natural resources, climate and communities," said Miller, the petition's lead author. "This head-in-the-sand approach must change."

The commission has 90 days to respond.

Confined animal feeding operations such as dairies are jointly regulated by the state's Department of Agriculture and Department of Environmental Quality.

However, the agencies are only responsible for ensuring the manure handled by CAFOs does not contaminate surface or ground water.

As early as 2008, a state-convened Dairy Air Quality Task Force recommended a dairy air emissions program in its report to ODA. Fourteen years later, Miller said, almost nothing has been done.

"Meanwhile, these operations keep getting bigger and bigger, and keep emitting more pollution into Oregon's atmosphere," she said. "This program is long overdue."

Food and Water Watch's analysis of state and federal data shows dairies with more than 2,500 cows in Oregon collectively release more than 17 million kilograms of methane every year, equivalent to the emissions from 318,000 cars.

Miller said not only are methane emissions exacerbating climate change, but pollutants can also cause health problems for employees and nearby communities. She said more than one-third of all dairy cows in the state are in Umatilla and Morrow counties.

The largest dairy, at Threemile Canyon Farms, has 70,000 cows about 15 miles west of Boardman along the Columbia River.

Mary Anne Cooper, vice president of public policy for the Oregon Farm Bureau, said the petition is a new tactic from groups that have long opposed large dairies.

In 2017, legislation was introduced in the state Senate directing the EQC to establish a dairy air emissions program. That bill, SB 197, died in committee.

Cooper said dairies have already voluntarily adopted best management practices to minimize air emissions, such as a methane digester built at Threemile Canyon Farms, which is used to generate electricity and renewable natural gas.

The petition, Cooper said, claims to address so-called "mega-dairies," yet the threshold or more cows is "very much family-scale operations in this state."

"You cannot support a family on a couple hundred milk cows," she said. "Their costs already exceed what they're getting on the market for their product."

Between added costs due to inflation and the passage of a state law mandating farmworkers be paid overtime, Cooper said it has already been a difficult year for producers.

"This (air emissions program) will have a real impact on people and on families," she said. "We have an industry with such tight margins. They're already trying to figure out how to accommodate a number of new regulatory burdens this year alone."

Petition to EQC

Twenty-two organizations have petitioned the Oregon Environmental Quality Commission to create a dairy air emissions program that would regulate farms with more than 700 cows.

Petitioners include:

- 350 Eugene
- 350 Deschutes
- Animal Legal Defense Fund
- American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
- Beyond Toxics
- Center for Biological Diversity
- Center for Food Safety
- Columbia Riverkeeper
- Comunidades Amplifying Voices for Environmental and Social Justice
- Environment Oregon
- Humane Voters Oregon
- Farm Forward
- Farm Sanctuary
- Food & Water Watch
- Friends of the Columbia Gorge