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LOCAL

Oregon rejects petition to regulate dairy air pollution in unanimous vote



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The Oregon Environmental Quality Commission has rejected a petition asking it to begin regulating air pollution from large dairies, saying the state doesn't have the resources, or enough information, to create such a regulatory program.

Commissioners asked the state Department of Environmental Quality to continue studying the issue and report back to them within a year.

The petition was filed last August by 22 advocacy groups, which want Oregon to declare large dairies sources of air pollution, just like factories.

Recent research from the lead petitioner, Food & Water Watch, found Oregon's mega dairies collectively release more than 17 million kilograms of methane each year, equivalent to the emissions from 318,000 cars.

Large dairies, or confined animal feeding operations, also emit ammonia, hydrogen sulfide and particulate matter, all of which can cause health problems in people.

Oregon DEQ officials had recommended commissioners reject the petition.

Emily Miller, the petition's lead author, said the groups were disappointed with DEQ's recommendation and the commission's decision.

"In recommending a denial of this petition, DEQ is ignoring the dire consequences of unregulated emissions from Oregon's dairies on our health, communities and climate," Miller said.

The vote to deny the petition was unanimous.

Some commissioners acknowledged the problem but said it was impossible to do anything until the Legislature provides additional funding.

“It seems pretty clear to me, based on the staff report, the presentation and the petition itself that there is potentially a serious risk to public health and to air quality associated with large dairies in the state,” commissioner Amy Schlusser said.

Others, however, said they don’t believe regulating dairy air pollution is a good use of the state’s limited funding.

“Bang for the buck, does this do us the most good from an air quality perspective?” Commissioner Greg Addington asked.

“When I look at the list of the petitioners and their missions, I’m not as convinced this is all about air quality,” Addington said. “I think this has to do with views of animal agriculture in general.”

Addington declared a potential conflict of interest before voting to deny the petition. He has accepted a job with the Oregon Farm Bureau, which submitted testimony opposing the proposal, he said.

The groups that signed on to the petition represent environmental, public health, sustainable agriculture, animal welfare and community interests.

They are: 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, Friends of Family Farmers, Mercy for Animals, Northwest Environmental Defense Center, Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility, Pendleton Community Action Alliance, Public Justice Foundation and World Animal Protection.

“The agency admits that dairy air pollution is a problem in Oregon, particularly for environmental justice communities in which these operations are disproportionately sited,” Food & Water Watch’s Miller said. “There is absolutely no valid reason to reject common sense regulations that will protect Oregonians from toxic emissions like ammonia, methane and fine particulate matter.”

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