

# Iowa's expanding livestock operations become targets of threats

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — A dozen of one farmer's cows have been gunned down since August. Another lost a 370-head hog nursery in a January fire investigators believe was intentionally set.

Reports of vandalism to farm equipment, buildings and at livestock construction sites have been turning up across rural Iowa. Some farmers also say they've received threatening telephone calls and letters from people condemning the bigger-is-better approach to raising cattle and pigs.

The question facing law enforcement officials is whether the incidents are random acts or deliberate, orchestrated attacks by those with personal, political or social agendas.

"We don't have any trends that we've identified in the past year or two that would suggest there is any organized effort to attack factory farms or large-scale hog operations," said Jim Saunders, spokesman for the Iowa Department of Public Safety.

"The reasons behind all these incidents could vary."

Since August, the Coalition to Support Iowa's Farmers has identified at least seven significant acts of violence and threats aimed at farmers.

The majority targeted hog producers who have expanded their operations or pursued government permits to do so, but cattle producers have also been victims, said Aaron Putze, executive director of the coalition, which helps farmers meet environmental regulations.

"There has always been farm vandalism on some levels. But we have certainly noticed an escalation in the more violent, threatening types of reports," Putze said. "It could be that farmers are more comfortable reporting incidents these days."

But the real question is what is the motivation behind this?"

Iowa is the nation's leading hog producer, and the industry's rapid growth in the past decade has provoked a public backlash on several fronts.

Detractors complain that large-scale hog and cattle operations threaten the environment and public health, depress property values and economically squeeze smaller producers.

As a result, opposition to corporate and super-sized operations has branched out beyond the usual suspects — animal rights activists and urban environmentalists — agriculture academics and supporters said.

"People locally are promoting a lot of anger and misinformation," said Mike Lawrinenko, a hog farmer from La Porte City in central Iowa.

When Lawrinenko started building a new barn to expand his operation last fall, threats and violence followed, including a suspicious, late-night fire ignited in a garbage can that damaged a corner of his home.

Nobody was hurt in the blaze, which Lawrinenko said he doused with a garden hose.

"A lot of it has subsided," he said. "But there was a lot of harassment. All we're trying to do is make our farm more profitable."

Mark Partridge, a professor at the Swank Program for Rural-Urban Policy at Ohio State University, said protesters can range from urban transplants to residents of nearby towns and even retired farmers who resent the changing industry.

"You can really go to almost any state and you're going to find these incredible levels of anger of these kinds of large-scale operations," Partridge said.

Yet cases of violence and intimidation such as those reported in Iowa are rare in other states, according to industry officials.

Last year in South Dakota, four

county commissioners who voted in favor of a dairy farm permit had nails scattered across their driveways.

An Indiana farmer reported last year that his locked well was poisoned while he pursued an expansion to his dairy operation.


"It's not something we really track," said Dave Warner, spokesman for the National Pork Producers Council. "We've seen some cases of it. I know it's something that's gone on to a certain extent as long as there has been the animal rights movement."

No arrests have been made in the Iowa cases, and investigators believe the acts are the work of locals rather than radical, outside groups known for attacks on labs, universities or companies that use animals for research purposes.

Still, Adams County farmer Gary Boswell said he's certain the attacks are prompted by the rise of larger-scale farms.

Boswell was particularly disturbed that two cows of a friend who farms in a neighboring county were shot and killed after the farmer filed for permits to expand his cattle operation.

"He got a call later with the person saying 'Now I guess you know we mean business,'" Boswell said. "This is an industry that is going through some changes, some growing pains. But this intimidation through violence is not part of our rural values."




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DES MOINES, IA — Dead cattle, a torched machine shed, vandalized feed equipment and the suspicious loss of a 370-head nursery building to fire have investigators searching for answers.

They also represent a growing trend of violence directed toward their livestock farms — a trend strongly condemned by the Coalition to Support Iowa's Farmers and its six founding organizations.

"Farm families who raise livestock are reporting increased incidences of violence directed toward them, their family members and property," said Bruce Berven, executive vice president of the Iowa Cattlemen's Association and CSIF board member.

"We urge law enforcement officials to take these events seri-

ously and to conduct comprehensive investigations. Those responsible must be prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

Since August 2006, CSIF has fielded seven reports from farmers detailing acts of violence or threats directed at property and family members — including five incidences in the past two months.

CSIF Executive Director Aaron Putze said much of the harassment has been directed at farmers who are raising hogs or planning to construct new indoor swine finishing barns.

A feed truck owned by 21st Century Cooperative was vandalized shortly after a representative of the farmer-owned company spoke in favor of two hog facilities proposed for Cass and Adair Counties.

The cooperative will provide

feed to the new farm. While waiting to speak in support of the proposed hog farm at the hearing, the feed cooperative's manager was presented a note reading, "You'll be sorry." — On Jan. 12, a suspicious fire destroyed a 370-head nursery building operated by Dan and June Muff of Ventura and their son Andy. It was the second fire detected on the farm in less than two months.

CSIF is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to helping livestock farmers grow responsibly and successfully. It's a collaborative effort funded by the Iowa Cattlemen's Association, Iowa Corn Growers Association, Iowa Farm Bureau, Iowa Pork Producers Association, Iowa Poultry Association and the Iowa Soybean Association.

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