

# GAO Questions Plan to Ease Farms' Emissions Rules

*House Panel Wants EPA to Rethink Disclosure Changes*

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WASHINGTON -- The nation's factory farms are running into resistance to their push for the Environmental Protection Agency to ease regulations requiring them to report the noxious gases wafting from their operations, some of which generate more waste in a year than the city of Philadelphia.

A report due out Wednesday from federal auditors says the EPA lacks information and a clearly defined strategy for effectively regulating mega-farms that have become controversial in some communities because of their potential effect on the environment.

The report by the Government Accountability Office is being published as a House oversight panel convenes a hearing Wednesday to pressure the EPA to rethink a proposal that would exempt certain large factory farms, called "concentrated animal-feeding operations," from having to report emissions of airborne pollutants from their operations. The GAO report also questions the EPA's proposal, saying the agency "does not have the information it needs to effectively regulate" emissions from factory farms.

Federal officials familiar with the GAO study said it represents the most extensive assessment of the growth of large-scale animal-feeding operations, which according to the GAO can generate as much as 1.6 million tons of manure annually. That is more than one and a half times the waste produced each year by the city of Philadelphia. According to the GAO, the number of concentrated animal-feeding operations more than tripled between 1982 and 2002.

Persuading the EPA to ease reporting requirements of their emissions levels has been a major goal of some agriculture lobbying groups. In 2005, the National Chicken Council, the U.S. Poultry & Egg Association and the National Turkey Federation petitioned the agency to exempt poultry growers from reporting requirements for ammonia emissions, saying the application of such requirements "does not improve environmental or public-health outcomes in any way" and creates overly severe burdens for tens of thousands of family-run businesses that operate poultry farms.

The GAO report notes that factory farms typically minimize potential environmental problems by retaining manure in storage facilities and disposing of it by spreading it on nearby cropland as fertilizer. But the report adds that such large volumes of manure can degrade air quality, by emitting "unsafe quantities" of ammonia, hydrogen sulfide and particulate matter.

The EPA's proposal, announced in December, would exempt animal-feeding operations from reporting emissions of ammonia and hydrogen sulfide above 100 pounds per day. A spokesman for the EPA said Tuesday that the goal of the proposal is "reducing reporting burdens and protecting public health and the environment." According to the GAO report, EPA officials who reviewed the auditors' findings acknowledged that no national inventory of large animal-feeding operations exists, but that the agency is working with states to develop one.

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