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River activists raise stink over hog waste lagoons

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Eastern North Carolinians love their barbecue.

But behind each plate piled high with the chopped pork is what environmental and community groups consider a nasty problem.

“In the entire history of the state of North Carolina, there’s never been a greater curse than (hog waste) lagoons,” said Rick Dove, former Neuse Riverkeeper and president of the Neuse River Foundation. “It’s sickened people and killed millions of fish.”

There are more than 2,300 industrial hog farms throughout North Carolina. There are about 10 million hogs on those farms.

The fecal waste those hogs produce — the equivalent of what is produced by 100 million people — is stored in lagoons on hog farms. The untreated waste is then sprayed on fields.

Twenty-two environmental and community groups joined last week to stage a 51-hour hog vigil — one hour for every day the General Assembly is in session. The event, held at Halifax Mall between the legislative buildings in downtown Raleigh, was designed to raise awareness about the issue and build support for a bill sponsored by state Sen. Charlie Albertson, a Duplin County Democrat.

Senate Bill 1465 would permanently ban new lagoons and spray fields and adopt standards to reduce pollution on existing ones.

Dove said he believes legislators want to do something about hog waste lagoons.

“I don’t think there’s one of them that doesn’t want that problem solved,” he said.

But the average resident is no match for pork industry lobbyists, Dove said. He said legislators need to “do the right thing. Tell the industry to step aside.”

Dove said pork industry officials complain they can’t afford to change how they dispose of waste. But Smithfield Foods, the nation’s largest pork supplier, made about \$1 billion in net earnings in the last five years, he said.

The pork industry is unwilling to change its practices because “all its profits are tied up in lagoons and spray fields,” Dove said.

Large companies that raise pigs on industrial farms can offer a cheaper product because of their unethical practices, said Lower Neuse Riverkeeper Larry Baldwin.

“The ones being hurt are the family farmers who are trying to raise hogs the way it used to be,” Baldwin said.

Less than 100 of those family farms still exist, Baldwin said. But he said meat from those farms tastes better because the farmers don’t have to use antibiotics to keep the animals healthy.

Besides hurting family farmers, activists said hog lagoons are causing health problems for all those who live near them.

“The issue here is these facilities are sited in poor communities, elderly communities and communities of color,” said Gary Grant, chairman of the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network. “People can no longer sit on their porches (or) enjoy their grandchildren. ... Legislators continue to make laws to allow (lagoons).”

Two such bills are House Bill 1264, sponsored by Russell Tucker, a Lenoir County Democrat, and Senate Bill 3, sponsored by Albertson. Both would allow hog farms to capture methane gas from waste lagoons.

“(With these bills) you’re not getting rid of the real problems,” Baldwin said. “It preserves the lagoon and spray problems.”

Legislators were scheduled to vote on SB 3 Tuesday.

While lawmakers decide whether they want to allow lagoons in Eastern North Carolina, it’s clear hog waste isn’t wanted in downtown Raleigh.

When Baldwin set up a mock hog lagoon for the vigil at Halifax Mall, facilities management officials told him he couldn’t have the waste there.

“They said ‘this is hazardous waste,’” Baldwin said. Groundskeepers told Baldwin they would have to call in a hazmat team if any of the waste spilled on the ground.

“The 30 gallons here is hazardous waste, but the billions of gallons all over the state is not?” Baldwin asked.