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See Also: Press Release: Legal Defense Fund Names "Factory Farm Five" in the Pennsylvania Senate, 1/15/04

Boss Hog: The Reign of Factory Farm Corporations

a Guest Editorial Submitted by:

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You have to hand it to them. After three aborted attempts to force legislation down the throats of the Pennsylvania House and Senate that shields factory farms from local control, certain State Senators -- supported by agribusiness corporations -- don't know when to give up.

Like energizer bunnies, those Senators will stop at nothing in their drive to inflict factory farms and liquid manure lagoons on unwilling rural communities across this State.

If only they'd work just as tirelessly to actually protect the rural quality of life of those communities.

Now, those agribusiness Senators are attempting to override the Governors' veto of their latest Bill -- claiming that Governor Rendell somehow goofed by not hand-delivering the veto to the House of Representatives on New Year's Eve, when the offices of the House were closed, and its members were back home watching the ball drop in Times Square.

How goofy is that? Or, more to the point, how anti-democratic is that? -- a small clique of agribusiness Senators refusing to accept a constitutional veto by a Governor they dislike.

Those Senators need to learn to hide their contempt for democracy a little better.

This statewide row all started in small Thompson Township in rural Fulton County. Residents and Township Supervisors decided that they didn't want agribusiness corporations setting up factory farms in their community. In grassroots democratic fashion, they adopted a law banning non-family owned corporations from owning or operating farms. They based their law on laws passed in nine Midwestern states aimed at protecting a family farmer based marketplace, which have been upheld by a variety of state and federal courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court.

Bruce Bivens, the Chairman of Supervisors in that Township, put his finger on the pulse when he defiantly declared that "I represent the people of this community, not a corporation."

That's how its supposed to work, right? Communities fashioning a vision for themselves through democratic involvement in their own local governments.

Wrong. After a dozen Townships followed the lead of Thompson Township, Republican Senators in the Pennsylvania Senate introduced Senate Bill 826, which sought to strip away all local control from communities to adopt laws dealing with factory farms. Due to an immense outcry from communities across the State, the Bill failed to move out of Committee.

Strike one.

Then, several Senators had the sleazy idea of renumbering the Bill and reintroducing it in the dead of night as Senate Bill 1413. That Bill moved through the Senate and through the House Agriculture Committee like a greased pig -- fourteen days from start to finish -- before a unique coalition of environmental, labor, farm groups, and over 400 Township governments defeated the Bill in the House.

Strike two.

Next, those Senators took a Bill dealing with child molesters and amended it with the anti-democratic language at 10:30 p.m. one evening just prior to Christmas break, and forced the House to vote on that Bill -- House Bill 1222 -- the next day. The prime sponsor of the Bill, Melissa Weber (R-Montgomery), was so disgusted by the Senators' actions (of her own party) that she removed herself from the Bill. Under pressure to approve a Bill that dealt with penalties for sex crimes, the House reluctantly voted to adopt the legislation.

Governor Ed Rendell, citing the Bill as an example of an inadequate "piecemeal" approach to factory farms in the State, stood up for local control, and vetoed the Bill.

Strike three.

True to form, those State Senators are now claiming that the Governor's veto wasn't proper and that it should be disregarded by Pennsylvania communities -- even as national papers, like the New York Times, issue editorials supporting the Governor's veto and calling for more local control over factory farms.

"We the people", meet Boss Hog. Welcome to the reign of agribusiness corporations over rural communities.

The Governor's veto should have been accompanied by an explanation of what's really happening here. Agribusiness corporations -- seeking to "corporatize" agriculture in this State by eliminating their competing, independent family farmers -- have long controlled the Agriculture Committees of the legislature, who foolishly refer to factory farms as "advanced farms." After all, having eliminated 300,000 farmers in the United States -- and over 3,000

independent family hog farmers in Pennsylvania alone -- just imagine what those corporations could do by eliminating community control over factory farms.

The events of late reveal who really runs Pennsylvania -- and it's a rude awakening to some who assumed that the ideal of self-government was alive and well in the Commonwealth.

Of course, agribusiness corporations and their shills, like the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, have long made the rules for our rural communities. Their arrogance is embarrassingly clear; their control of the Senate almost complete. But, the role of agribusiness corporations in Pennsylvania is not the exception, but the rule.

Long ago, corporations did a fine job of hijacking the Constitution -- in the late 1800's they used the federal Courts to grab Bill of Rights' protections for themselves, even though those civil rights were originally intended to only protect natural persons, not corporations.

In addition to their recent power play within the Pennsylvania legislature, agribusiness corporations have made a fine art of suing Township governments, using those Bill of Rights' protections to allege that local Ordinances somehow violate their "corporate constitutional rights" and must be overturned by Courts. Through those lawsuits, the corporations seek millions of dollars of damages from our local governments. Our money, as taxpayers, of course.

It's time to retire all of the Senators who go to bat for corporations over people. It's time to retire all of those legislators who vote to place the profits of the few over the needs of the many.

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