

House Agriculture Passes Meaningless Animal Welfare Bills  
Sierra Club Press Statement by Gayle Miller, Legislative Director  
July 27, 2009

Today the House Agriculture Committee passed a package of so-called Animal Welfare bills over the strong objections of the environmental community, the Michigan Farmers Union representing small, non-industrialized farms, the State Bar of Michigan, faith groups, animal welfare organizations and more. Four of the six democrats on the committee opposed the bills or passed when the vote was taken.

The bills set up an expensive and unnecessary regulatory process requiring all farms in the state – from animal factories on down to hobby farmers – to hire auditors to oversee the way they care for their animals. The farm audit system established in the bills specifies that the auditor work for the farm, and not the people of Michigan, creating an immediate conflict of interest. What's worse, all information collected by the auditor stays on the farm, guaranteeing that the public can learn nothing about the food they eat.

After four hours of vigorous debate in the committee, and vocal opposition by Rep. Vicki Barnett (D-Farmington Hills), even the Department of Agriculture agreed that the state already has the authority to require better standards for animal welfare. The bills, however, actually put implementation of existing animal welfare standards on hold until 2020, delaying compliance with care standards that should already be in place – meaning the bills are a stall tactic.

Representatives Barnett and Valentine (D-Muskegon) urged Chairman Simpson (D-Jackson) to postpone a vote on the bills so that a workgroup could be established that would include a broader section of the public and farming community. However, the bills as passed by the Committee today were negotiated behind closed doors between the Chairman, the Farm Bureau and industrial producer groups. Other groups were not invited.

The Sierra Club is particularly concerned with the self-regulatory audit program. Similar programs suggesting how animal factories operate have for years enabled CAFOs to cause severe air and water pollution in rural communities while preventing rural residents and communities from protecting their public health.

Fundamentally the package of bills is designed to keep the public from knowing how their food is produced. The horrific conditions often found within animal factories will not be solved by this package, but will instead allow business to continue as usual. The public will have less, not more, information and confidence in the quality of their food if these bills pass.

People who have first-hand knowledge of CAFO-style food production are seeking alternatives – thus the boom in farm markets and direct, farm-to-consumer marketing. Unfortunately, the small producers feeding these hungry markets will be unfairly burdened by these new regulations.

The Farm Bureau and industrial agriculture have fought meaningful regulation for years. The fact that these groups are now *asking* for additional regulation should raise a red flag.