Big livestock farms breed controversy in Illinois

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The Associated Press published an in-depth story this weekend describing how concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) bring discord into rural communities. As reporter Tammy Webber wrote, “Few things divide rural communities like the supersized livestock farms that quickly are dominating the industry and challenging the traditional notion of farming.”

The article profiles an Illinois man named Robert Young who has farmed all his life on the same piece of land. In 2009 he built a 29,000-square-foot barn to house 3,600 hogs. He fattens those hogs for Cargill, one of the four major meat processing companies in the United States.

According to Young, becoming a CAFO was a necessary move to be successful farm and help him retire.

"The economy tightened up and we were struggling," he told the AP.

Several of Young's neighbors sued to stop Young's hog operation. Among them was Curt Davis who said he was hesitant to call Young's CAFO a farm. "I refer to it as a factory because I believe that's really what it is," Davis said.

(Davis) said neighbors worry about odors, property values and the potential for health and pollution problems from the manure stored in an almost 1 million-gallon pit under Young's barn and periodically injected into nearby cropland, but would not talk about specific complaints in detail because of the lawsuit. But Davis, who lives about 1½ miles from the barn, said residents also fret because there is virtually no way to stop Young — or other livestock farmers — from expanding.

Some livestock producers say they are forced to make such contracts with large companies because the industry is structured so that a producer must have a large operation to survive. But other farmers feel that such a dramatic increase in concentrated production disturbs the traditional farming way of life.

“All of us love where we live, and without being tree huggers, are environmentalists,” said Ramona Cook, another resident of rural Illinois who successfully fought the approval of a nearby hog confinement.

For Young, the consequence is having neighbors that refuse to talk to him. Still, he says he’s not sorry he built the barn.