

August 19, 2005
How to Poison a River

New York is increasingly a state of mega-dairies, and when things go wrong with such operations, they go wrong in a mega-way. The Marks Farm near Lowville, N.Y., has a herd of some 3,000 dairy cows. Their milk is trucked away regularly, but their liquefied manure is stored in a reservoir with earthen walls. How much manure? Before Aug. 11, the reservoir at the Marks Farm contained some three million gallons. Sometime in the next day, one of the walls blew out and released most of that waste into the Black River, a popular fishing stream and a water source for towns downstream. In case you have trouble visualizing it, three million gallons of liquid manure is roughly equivalent to the water in six Olympic-size swimming pools.

The result has been a major fish kill and the loss - at least temporarily - of all recreation on the river. The mess has been gradually diluted and will finally make its way into Lake Ontario, where it will do the fish there no good.

With any luck, what this spill will leave behind is a resolve to place new limits on concentrated animal feeding operations - as these mega-farms are known - in New York. As always, advocates of industrial farming argue that the increase in the number of large dairies and the inevitable loss of small ones are just a result of market forces and economic efficiency. But this has always been nonsense.

Mega-dairies, like huge hog confinement operations, are all too often forced upon local communities against their will. Some New York towns have tried to restrict the expansion of industrial farms nearby. But whenever that happens, the State Department of Agriculture and Markets has sued, or threatened to sue, under the state's Right to Farm Law.

That law made sense when farms were smaller and incapable of causing serious air pollution or a manure spill of massive proportions. Farmers still need to be protected against frivolous lawsuits, but the state needs to get out of the business of forcing industrial farms on communities that don't want them. And when farms operate at the scale of Marks Farm, they need to meet far stricter environmental standards than currently prevail. This disaster should never have had a chance to happen.