

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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CATHOLICS PAYING MORE ATTENTION TO ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

As the public becomes more concerned over the health of our environment, Catholics and Church leadership at multiple levels have engaged environmental issues. In recent years, Catholics in the U.S. have participated in environmental advocacy through the efforts of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, Catholic Relief Services, and other groups.

On January 1, 2010, Pope Benedict devoted his World Day of Peace message to the topic of care for God's creation. The Pope specifically mentioned energy policy and solar power, global water usage, rural development centered on small or family farms, forest management, waste disposal, and climate change, as areas of concern.

Here in Wisconsin, parishioners have shown more interest in environmental concerns, particularly issues surrounding agriculture. Given that Wisconsin's economic success has always relied on agriculture, it continues to be a topic of interest and concern statewide. For Catholics though, food production is about more than economics. It also relates directly to whether we, as a society, are able to meet that which is most basic to the preservation of human dignity, proper nourishment.

As the U.S. bishops noted in their 2005 pastoral, *"For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food"* (Mt 25:35): *Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers and Farm Workers*, agriculture affects everyone, whether rural or urban:

Agriculture touches all our lives, wherever we live or whatever we do. It is about how we feed our own families, and the whole human family. It is about how we treat those who put food on our table and those who do not have enough food. It is about what is happening to food and farming, rural communities and villages, in the face of increasing concentration, new technology, and growing globalization in agriculture.

Recently, the Wisconsin Catholic Conference provided written comments to the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) during the agency's public comment period on an administrative rule governing livestock feeding operations. The rule, ATCP 51, governs the establishment or expansion of large livestock operations, also known as "concentrated animal feeding operations" (CAFOs).

The number of CAFOs in Wisconsin has grown rapidly. In 1985, Wisconsin had one CAFO. By 2009, the number had grown to 154 dairy and 31 other livestock CAFOs. As the number of factory farms has increased, so too has their size. Some dairy CAFOs have as many as 4,000 cows and are seeking to expand to 8,000 cows.

Our comments urged DATCP to modify the rule to strengthen input by local government in the placement and management of these operations. Our letter cited the Church's "principle of subsidiarity." This principle holds that decisions should generally be addressed at the most local level that is appropriate. Applying the principle to this situation, we suggested that rural communities deserve a greater voice in these questions.

As Catholics, we must continue to engage issues from the perspective of our social teaching. We are increasingly called to the example of St. Francis of Assisi and offer public witness to the Church's message of stewardship. Such a message is an important part of our identity as Catholics. And it is vital to making sure Wisconsin, and our world, remains a healthy place to live.

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