

Shawano County farm eyes major expansion

Town of Almon operation could rank among state's largest

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In a move that could create one of Wisconsin's largest dairy operations, Matsche Farms Inc. has unveiled plans to expand its herd by hundreds of animals and to build a manure pit the size of four football fields.

State regulators say expansion of the family-owned farm near Birnamwood would put its herd at an estimated 9,000 cows, heifers and calves, making it the biggest such operation in Shawano County.

It also would rival the state's largest dairy farms — sometimes called factory farms by critics — in Kewaunee County, Outagamie County and Rock County.

Although environmentalists voice concerns about the impact on water quality and air quality, local officials are cheering Matsche Farms for a project that they say would signal healthy growth in the agriculture industry.

"It's the wave of the future," town of Almon Chairman Jim Gutt said. "The little farms are gone — let's face it."

According to plans submitted to the county, Matsche Farms plans to build two new barns, each about a quarter-mile long, as well as a new milking parlor and a storage pit capable of storing 25 million gallons of manure. The pit would be about 20 feet deep and would be lined with concrete.

Matsche Farms officials said their plans are state-of-the-art and would comply with government regulations designed to protect the environment. Those officials also said they are not striving for industry prominence, but rather are replacing outdated facilities while improving comfort for their animals and employees.

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"We just want our cows to have the best."

CARRIE MATSCHE, of family-owned Matsche Farms Inc.



LEADER PHOTO BY SCOTT WILLIAMS

Matsche Farms Inc. has about 4,700 cows, heifers and calves already, and could grow to as many as 9,000 under an expansion plan.

cows to have the best," spokeswoman Carrie Matsche said.

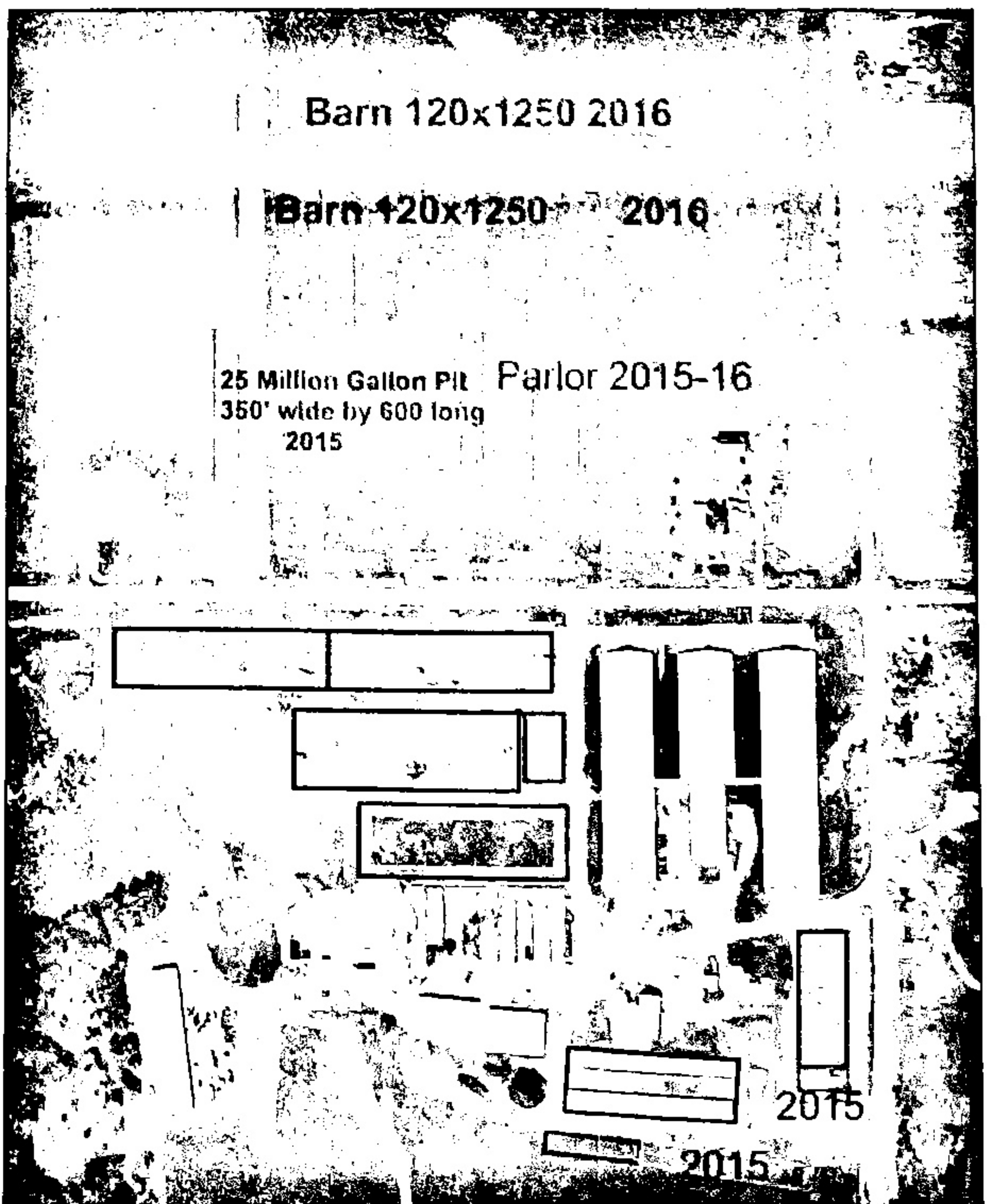
Although the farm's plans call for a herd of about 9,000 animals eventually, family members said they would initially add just 1,300 to a herd of 4,700.

Responding to expected concerns from environmentalists, family member Heather Matsche said the operation seeks to educate children and others about farming and the agriculture business.

"We're not doing anything bad around here," she said. "We're just expanding because we have to."

Large farm expansions in other parts of the state have drawn criticism from environmentalists who argue that the businesses threaten water quality in particular, by generating huge volumes of animal waste. Environmental groups are battling Kinnard Farms Inc. in Kewaunee County over a proposed expansion similar in size to that of Matsche Farms.

SEE FARM, A2



Plans submitted to Shawano County show the estimated 40-acre existing Matsche farm south of County Road N and the expansion site to the north.