

Farm

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director of the Madison-based group.

On behalf of about a half-dozen local residents, the environmental group has asked the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to reconsider its approval of a permit for the Kinnard Farms expansion.

Kinnard Farms operators Rodney and Lee Kinnard, who are brothers, say their business does not harm the environment now and would not present any greater threat if it expands. Most of the manure would serve only to fertilize crops that are converted into feed for the dairy cows — a closed-loop system that is actually good for the environment, they say.

Already generating more than 20,000 gallons of milk a day, the Kinnards pledge that their expanded farm would be state-of-the-art and would not bother any neighbors.

"Given the chance, they will really like what they see," Lee Kinnard said.

But if any neighbor is truly unhappy living next to the operation once the expansion is complete, the Kinnards say they will offer to purchase that neighbor's property at a fair market price.

Added Rodney Kinnard: "I'm not here to be a bad neighbor. We're very proud of what we do."

The dispute has pitted Kinnard Farms against longtime neighbors in the town of Lincoln, an unincorporated farming community of about 1,000 people north of Casco, not far from Door County.

Town Board member Arlin Monfils, a former town chairman, said residents are accustomed to living alongside herds of dairy cows. But because of the size of Kinnard Farms' planned growth, Monfils said, the project has people worried about the environmental impact, even if it meets regulatory stan-

dards.

"It's not that they don't want to see dairy farms," he said. "It's just one huge jump."

Residents aligned with Midwest Environmental Advocates have expressed concerns that having 6,000 dairy cows in the area will not only threaten water quality, it will create excessive odor, noise and air pollution.

Dan Routhieux, who lives nearby with his wife and three children, said he fears that the family will be unable to enjoy outdoor activity, and that piles of manure will seep underground, making water unsafe to drink.

Routhieux said the Kinnards have allowed business considerations to overtake their family farm.

"On a family farm, the cows get names. They're not 'units,'" Routhieux said. "That ain't family farming no more."

Changing landscape

The dispute highlights a growing number of Wisconsin farms — mostly dairy farms — that have grown large enough to qualify as concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFOs. That government term refers to any farm that has more than 1,000 animal units, equal to about 700 dairy cows.

Sometimes called "factory farms," the CAFO term was created in the 1970s when the federal Clean Water Act placed new restrictions on farmers. The designation brings increased regulation by the state Department of Natural Resources, mostly to control animal manure handling so it does not endanger water quality.

Today there are 235 such farms statewide, compared with a handful or so 25 years ago. About 60 are in a nine-county region surrounding Green Bay.

Casey Jones, a DNR agricultural specialist, said the number has climbed steadily over the years as

ABOUT KINNARD FARMS INC.

Location: E2675 County Road S, Casco

Founded: 1947

Business: Dairy production

Employees: 40

Milking parlor: 72 cows at a time, 23 hours a day

Daily production: 220,000 pounds (approx. 23,000 gallons)

Owners: Rodney, Lee and Maureen Kinnard

farmers have aimed for strategies to boost productivity. Trying to achieve greater economies of scale, many have consolidated with neighboring farms, often those owned by family or friends.

"It's a different way of doing things," she said.

The transition is reflected in statewide trends, with about 11,000 dairy farms operating in Wisconsin today, down from 44,000 in 1980.

But as the industry has evolved, environmental safeguards have improved, too, both through new techniques embraced by farming professionals and through watchdog efforts of state regulators, Jones said.

"Things have come a long way," she said.

Bigger is better?

Not everyone is convinced that bigger is better.

Wright said her environmental group sees large-scale farming operations as uncontrolled pollution threats. She calculated that an expanded Kinnard Farms would generate 76 million gallons of manure annually. Such operations are driven by profit motives, are immune to local control and are under-regulated by a DNR crippled by budget cuts.

"These are not farms — they are factories," she said.

The Kinnards disagree with that assessment, saying that they adhere to long-held farming traditions. The business was founded in 1947 by their

parents, Alvin and Mildred Kinnard.

Rodney and Lee Kinnard also believe their planned expansion is being called into question by a vocal minority of surrounding residents. Concerns about the environment are a smokescreen created by people who underestimate how many safeguards are in place already, they say.

"I see people who are well intended, but are very uneducated about the process," Lee Kinnard said. "We've tried to rise above it."

A Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation official described farm growth backlash as symptomatic of lifestyle changes in which urban commuters increasingly travel through rural areas, bringing city and country populations closer together.

Paul Zimmerman, executive director of government relations for the farm bureau, said newcomers typically expect to find picturesque little dairy farms — not the super-sized cow-milking operations that are popping up in the countryside in growing numbers.

Voicing support for such farmers, Zimmerman said critics should remember that dairy farming remains vitally important to Wisconsin — even if it looks different than it used to.

"Dairy is the king of agriculture in Wisconsin," he said. But, "Today's agriculture is not the red barn with the pretty silo."

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