

# PRESS RELEASE

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About a dozen members of the Williams County Alliance met with State Representative Steve Buehrer (R-Delta) this week to discuss area residents' concerns about a proposed chicken mega-facility locating in the county.

The Alliance formed several weeks ago when rumors began to circulate that Fremont Farms of Iowa, registered in Ohio as IPRO II, is looking at land in Williams County for a laying hen operation that would have at least three million chickens.

Legislation passed at the state level in the past several years has consolidated the permitting process for concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), shifting all permitting authority to the Ohio Department of Agriculture (ODA). A bill passed in 2000 transferred control from the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency to the ODA; a follow-up bill in 2003 completed the shift of authority to the ODA.

The Alliance charges that these changes have left local communities unprotected from the negative impacts of an industrial agricultural facility. Local governments have no meaningful say in the permitting process, and the state legislature has not given the Ohio Department of Agriculture the authority to consider the impacts to local quality of life (impact such as odors, property value decreases, affects on infrastructure, etc.) in its decision-making.

Representative Buehrer voted for both bills, and has been an advocate of the permitting system now in place. He has repeatedly stated that Ohio has some of the strictest permitting regulations in the whole country.

"I specifically asked Representative Buehrer if he feels the current permitting system is adequate to protect local communities, and he never really gave a direct answer," said Sherry Fleming, WCA spokesperson who facilitated the Monday night meeting. "There were many of our questions he wouldn't answer – he just kept asking questions back to us."

WCA member and farmer Mel Clark expressed a similar sense of frustration. "I think you could say we had very little satisfaction [in the meeting]."

When asked his stance on Senate Bill 230, which would place a moratorium on construction of new CAFOs in Ohio until specific changes are made in the permitting process, Representative Buehrer stated that he does not yet have an opinion on the bill and needs to study it. A WCA member then observed that Representative Buehrer made the same statement several weeks ago (Bryan Times 3/31/06), and proposed he ought to find time to study SB 230 since so many of his constituents are urging him to take a position on it.

Bryan Davis of Bryan asked Mr. Buehrer if he would facilitate a meeting between the author of SB 230 and key members of the Alliance. He stated that he would assist in securing the meeting, and would notify Mr. Davis with the details.

Representative Buehrer reportedly acknowledged that he would not want a chicken operation of this size located near him, and said that he couldn't blame the Alliance for opposing it. But when Alliance members asked for his help in keeping the operation out of Williams County, he demurred, suggesting that his job is to deal with issues that impact the whole state.

Dave Whitlock of West Unity understood Mr. Buehrer to be saying that he wasn't going to support the citizens' efforts. "Somebody asked, 'will you help us?' – and he said it's not my job."

Mr. Buehrer did suggest that it would be useful to do a comprehensive economic test to determine if CAFOs are a positive economic benefit to communities or not. Asked if he would support a moratorium so as to allow WCA time to complete a comprehensive economic and environmental impact study, Mr. Buehrer replied he would look into it.

In addition, Mr. Buehrer has sent a letter to Fred Slicker, head of the local Farm Bureau, asking that any information about the proposed mega-facility be released to the public. To date, Mr. Buehrer said, he has not received a response from Mr. Slicker.

Williams County Alliance had been attempting to arrange a meeting with Representative Buehrer since late March, when Buehrer commented in a Bryan Times news story (3/31/06) that he would be willing to meet with leaders of the Alliance. Three weeks ago, the Alliance met with Representative Jim Hoops (R-Napoleon), who, along with Representative Buehrer, is running for the Republican nomination for State Senate District 1 in the May 2 election.

Representative Hoops attended the Alliance's public meeting in Edon on April 11. The Edon meeting was one of six public meetings that WCA sponsored around the county to show a video of interviews with residents of Malcom, Iowa, where Fremont Farms operates a 5.2 million laying hen facility.

Representative Buehrer did not attend any of the public meetings, though he said that he sent individuals to one of the meetings to represent him. He said these individuals had reported back to him about that meeting.

The Alliance is putting together a survey to send to every candidate who will be on the Williams County ballot in May, asking if they support the chicken mega-facility proposal, and if they think the current system, which regulates CAFOs as agriculture rather than industry, is adequate. The group plans to publicize the survey responses.