



The Ripon
Commonwealth

Press
Ripon, WI 54971
143rd Year

Hey Rosendale, in case you didn't know, Here come the cows

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Ripon Commonwealth Press

January 28, 2010

DNR approval means dairy set to become biggest in Wisconsin

For the past several years, Ripon-area residents have heard about how Rosendale Dairy could become “the largest dairy in the state of Wisconsin.”

As of last week Friday, it became a virtual certainty.

The DNR approved a request by Rosendale Dairy to modify its wastewater permit, allowing dairy owners to expand its herd to 8,000 cows and 300 steer.

“For the regulations existing this permit is reflective of the extent of our authority,” said Liz Spaeth-Werner, wastewater specialist for the DNR.

The ruling also allows Rosendale Dairy to spread manure on about 12,000 acres – up from about 4,000 used to this point.

“We are very confident and happy we have gone through the process,” said Jim Ostrom, one of three partners in Rosendale Dairy (along with John Vosters and Todd Willer). “We are confident it protects the environment. It is the most regulated farm in the state history. That said, we work very hard daily to protect the environment and the community.”

Ostrom described the DNR scrutiny on the farm as “extraordinary.”

Permit Regulates Dairy's Activities

According to the DNR, the permit imposes conditions over and above the requirements contained in permits issued to other large livestock operations, including:

- Extra limits on how much manure and commercial fertilizer can be spread on fields under different conditions;
- Increasing the setback between where manure can be spread and water wells from 100 feet to 200 feet;
- Continuing to require Rosendale Dairy monitor monthly, whereas the few other dairies that are required to monitor are asked to do so quarterly. Even so, under the permit modification, Rosendale will be allowed to revert to quarterly monitoring if none of its water samples exceed groundwater quality standards for 24-straight months.
- Greater scrutiny of its plan for managing how, when and where it applies manure and other nutrients.
- Additional monitoring of pipelines carrying liquid manure.

Implicit in approval of the request is an OK to go forward with a nutrient management plan (NMP), already conditionally approved by the DNR.

The plan enables Rosendale Dairy to go forward with a statistical-analysis plan for ensuring groundwater is not within 24 inches of the surface in numerous locations around the area.

Rather, it will be allowed to place about 80 monitoring points, rather than the traditional 900 or so, to ensure manure doesn't easily enter the groundwater.

Neighbors Disappointed

While the partners who created Rosendale Dairy demonstrated their excitement at the result, others – especially neighbors of the dairy who have complained about its presence in the past months – see this differently.

“The cost of contamination will fall to the people,” said Elaine Swanson of People Empowered Protect the Land (PEPL) of Rosendale. “Neighbors are already reporting asthma symptoms in adults and children, migraines and a sense of becoming a prisoner in your own home to escape the stench.”

She believes the dairy will damage the local environment in other ways as well.

“Rosendale Dairy’s four high capacity wells represent massive water withdrawals,” Swanson said. “An aquifer is a finite resource. Entire ecosystems will be disrupted when groundwater supplies are depleted. We predict in the coming years, our land and drinking water will be violated beyond any compensation or clean-up attempts. If dairy trumps all, the only safe drinking water will be set before the cows.”

DNR Addresses Concerns

Numerous concerns were forwarded to the DNR during a public comment period it held in December before issuing the WPDES permit.

It listed responses to those concerns as part of the permit modification notice.

Responses to public comment detail the reasoning the DNR used in finalizing the permit modification, as well as in creating the original permit.

“Significant time and study was devoted to the evaluation of the current facility prior to this permit modification,” the DNR responded. “The EIS [environmental impact statement] comprehensively addressed the potential environmental impact of the facility with 11,500 animal units [the equivalent of the 8,000 cows and 300 steer].”

The DNR also noted that, following its studies of Rosendale Dairy, “The department does not anticipate that increased pollutants will result from the activities of the permittee.”

It also countered concerns that Rosendale Dairy will greatly pollute area waterways.

“The department does not concur that ‘an unprecedented amount of pollution’ will be discharged into Green Lake, the Fox River and the Rock River and does not believe that significant amounts of pollutants will reach these waters when the NMP is followed and the permit is complied with,” according to the DNR. “Proper implementations of the NMP will minimize pollutants reaching these waters.”

It later added, "The department believes the permit requirements and proper implementations of the NMP will adequately protect groundwater and nearby waterways from the impacts of manure spreading on surrounding farmlands."

The DNR also explained it believes Rosendale Dairy will keep adequate records to verify that it is in compliance with state requirements.

"While record-keeping is primarily a responsibility of the permittee, there has been a high frequency of site visits to Rosendale Dairy by department staff," the DNR wrote. "We anticipate continued DNR site visits with or without complaints. Additionally, a number of records kept by the facility are required to be submitted annually to the department to verify compliance with permit conditions."

"The oversight and scrutiny and standard-bearing has been very significant," Ostrom said. "I am very thankful that the permit was issued so now we can move forward economically and provide jobs."

Expansion Imminent

With all the necessary permits now in hand, Rosendale Dairy will begin to expand almost immediately.

"We probably will bring trucks in the next few days," Ostrom said, explaining this process will take time. "Each group of cows has to be given time to adjust."

Cattle will continue to arrive into June, he said, with construction work at the site set to be completed by May.

Ostrom also anticipates that, at some point, Rosendale Dairy will upgrade its manure treatment facility.

"There is manure technology definitely on the horizon," he said. "We currently are evaluating a couple different ones. We met with someone a few days ago; we're meeting with a couple of folks in the next couple weeks. It's very exciting, but it's very complicated. But I think you'll see us adopt more and more technology as time goes on."

With the expansion coming to a close, Ostrom said the dairy will fill 35 more positions in the coming weeks.

"At full scale, we will be at 80 to 90 employees," he said, noting the positions include full benefits.