

# Some Kansans opposing mega cattle feedlot

**Calen Moore**  
Kansas News Service

PAWNEE COUNTY – The western side of Kansas is a great place to produce beef.

It has wide open spaces that seem to go on forever and low humidity. The region has embraced its beef culture and is now home to 75% of the state’s feedlots. These facilities are where cattle are sent to be fed a high-energy diet to gain weight before being sent to a beef packing plant.

Outside of small towns these feedlots look like miles of fences with cattle standing end to end. But some people have started to be wary of these expansive developments.

“It’s good to live in beef country, as long as it ain’t too close. They’re able to stir up enough dust and stink,” Merrill Cauble said.

Cauble is a farmer who lives near the town of Larned in Pawnee County. He has been skeptical of the increase of feedlots near where he lives.

## Pushing back against the norm

The company Innovative Livestock Solutions has feedlots across central Kansas and Nebraska. There are three in Pawnee County with a combined capacity of 72,000 cattle.

They are looking to expand and proposed a new facility that can hold 88,000 cattle. That’s a lot of livestock for a county with only about 6,000 people. It would be one of the biggest feedlots in Kansas.

All those animals are estimated to produce over 5 million pounds of manure every day. Beef cattle eat high protein diets, which can produce nitrogen heavy manure. That poses a risk if it gets into waterways or seeps into the aquifer underground where people get their drinking water.

“It’s not going to do the community any good whatsoever, and that’s why we decided to push back,” Cauble said.

After the Kansas Department of Health and Environment reviewed the feedlot’s plans, the agency held a public hearing in Larned to see what the town had to say about it.

Cauble teamed up with the Kansas Sierra Club, an environmental advocacy group. The duo along with those critical of another huge feedlot were vocal about their concerns to KDHE.

“These feed yards have been polluting our waters for years, and their rec-



**Cattle stand in pens awaiting their feed in a feedlot near Garden City, just west of Larned.** CALEN MOORE/KANSAS NEWS SERVICE

ommendations haven’t improved the problem to the extent to where we have safe nitrate levels,” Cauble said.

They gained quite the following of locals questioning the safety of another large feedlot near the community.

## Something in the water

Pawnee County and other central Kansas counties already have an established history of high nitrate levels in their groundwater.

The soil in this region is very sandy, so things can easily leak through. The community also sits above the Ogallala aquifer. Towns like Larned rely almost exclusively on the aquifer for drinking water.

Late last year, student researchers from three Kansas colleges found that nitrate levels in private wells in south-central Kansas are as much as five times higher than Environmental Protection Agency limits for healthy drinking water, which is 10 milligrams per liter.

High nitrate levels in water can cause “blue baby syndrome” where children under six months have their blood deprived of oxygen. There are also some studies that link high nitrate levels with increased risk of some colon and kidney cancers.

The researchers say the pollution is likely due to fertilizer leaking into the groundwater. But some Larned residents believe that fresh feedlot manure is contributing to that as well, but it’s

not clear if that has been proven.

According to the EPA, Kansas ranks second in the nation in estimated area with higher levels of nitrates in drinking water than permissible.

The EPA estimates that 5% of Kansans have private, unregulated water wells.

Kansas State University student Chase Glasscock said most of those Kansans are farmers who keep the economy going, and neglecting their needs could hurt the state.

“If we’re not taking care of them, then we’re not taking care of ourselves,” Glasscock said when presenting his data to the public in November.

## Response from the health department and company

KDHE said in an email that the reason the ILS feedlot was approved was because it met all the statutory and regulatory requirements. But the agency did acknowledge the elevated risk the region has due to its soil composition.

To try and address the community’s concerns, KDHE provided stricter guidelines than the minimum to control pollution. That includes seepage requirements for the manure lagoon and protections for groundwater much greater than required by state law.

“We are committed to our role in protecting the environment but also acknowledge that owners of feeding facilities have rights that have been set in law. We are only able to enforce re-

quirements that we have jurisdiction over,” KDHE spokesperson Mitchell Osterlund said.

ILS also expressed an interest to go above and beyond and adhere to more stringent standards tailored to this unique situation.

ILS sent Jon Skelton, their chief financial officer, to the meeting to calm the waters.

Skelton told the attendees that a significant number of ILS shareholders live locally within or near the county.

ILS didn’t respond to a request for comment.

There have been proponents of the feedlot who have been surprised by the negative backlash. A few spoke at the public hearing and have been trying to make the case that this feedlot will create economic opportunities.

It’s estimated that the feedlot will create 70 jobs for the town, but also could provide a strong market for nearby farmers and agribusinesses.

Pawnee County has been steadily losing its population for decades. Some here are eager for new business and development.

In a press release, ILS estimated it will contribute approximately \$50 million in added valuation to Pawnee County’s tax base.

With the permit approved, construction is planned to start later this year, with the facility operating by 2027

## Where to go from here

Felix Revello is a chapter delegate for the Kansas Sierra Club near Larned. He has been leading the charge in opposition to the feedlot.

“We want the permit to operate the proposed feedlot withheld until after any water and air pollution from existing feedlots is researched and remediated,” Revello said.

Revello and Cauble spent their time at a local festival handing out a petition to appeal KDHE’s approval of the feedlot’s permit. With over 50 signatures and a lot of firsthand stories about health and environmental concerns with a feedlot of this magnitude, Revello delivered the information to Gov. Laura Kelly’s office.

“Urban areas would not tolerate this level of health risk and pollution,” Revello said. “Why do we constantly ask our rural residents to?”

*Calen Moore covers western Kansas for High Plains Public Radio and the Kansas News Service.*

Continued from previous page

there in la la land on that, but that’s what I thought we were going to be doing.”

Carpenter said he would like the commission to look at what other states have done and hold a public forum to get input.

“Some of the critics of what was in front of the Legislature did not recognize or appreciate what other states have done in this regard, because we were not an island for that particular piece of legislation or regulation,” said commission chair Whitney Damron, of Topeka. “We are seeing increased pressure, and perhaps some of that is because people are being forced out of other states that have been ahead of us in adopting these kinds of regulations or restrictions on nonresidents. So it would be helpful for me to see what surrounding states have done.”

Damron said people want the issue addressed “and would like to see us continue to try to put something that is acceptable to the critics and to people, even residents and nonresidents alike.”

Schrag, the KDWP deputy secretary, said agency staff can “regroup” and provide commissioners with an overview at the June meeting of other states’ actions and options available to Kansas policymakers.

Commissioner Emerick Cross, of Kansas City, Kansas, asked “will this be handled by the Legislature or this commission?”

Wiard said with regulation 115-8-25 is “on hold” and “frozen” because of HB 2648, going forward “I can’t give you an answer right now. All I can say is that we’re discussing it internally. We’re not prepared to give an answer at the moment.”

Commissioner Keith Mark, of Basehor and the founder of Hunter Nation, said “obviously there’s an appetite for it.” He suggested the commission and KDWP should try a different route to tackle the issue and come up with “a new regulation.”

“The public perception that maybe this is dead and gone because the governor vetoed it, I don’t think that’s true,” Mark said, noting that commissioners and KDWP staff support addressing the



**An increased numbers of hunters from outside the state has put more pressure on Kansas wetlands and waterfowl, which has limited opportunities for Kansas residents.** THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL/2024 FILE

issue, as did a majority of lawmakers.

Wiard said while they “can certainly look” at other ideas to put in regulation, the Legislature’s law blocking costly regulations limits what the agency can do.

“It’s very hard to give you a direct answer on whether we can resolve this issue simply through regulation,” Wiard said. “I think there are regulations that have small enough economic impacts that we can move forward with, but each proposal we’ll have to look at specifically to try to assess, or at least get a good idea of what that economic impact would be, and whether we could move it through the regulatory process, with or without ratification.”

Carpenter expressed skepticism that the commission could come up with a different approach that would be below

the Legislature’s threshold of \$1 million in economic impact over five years.

“I don’t know of any nonresident waterfowl plan that in fact would fall under that guideline,” Carpenter said. “If you do the same thing again, you’re going to get the same results. So we’re back to the drawing board.”

Carpenter said he would like to have a proposal by next legislative session, and they can “craft a better bill” that accomplishes the same goals while addressing concerns. He suggested raising the fees for nonresident stamps might be more politically palatable in the Legislature.

The commission is unable to raise nonresident fees on its own. Wiard indicated KDWP is already charging the statutory cap on waterfowl fees.

“It’s our job,” Mark said, “to shepherd the Kansas resource and make it avail-

able for Kansans at the cheapest price, without excluding out-of-staters — but the out-of-staters that come are going to have to pay more than their fair share for the privilege.”

Damron said while the commission has “unanimous consensus” around resolving the issue, “it is an educational issue, in particular with Kansas Legislature, and that’s where the messaging will need to happen in 2026.”

“I’m not done with this, by any means,” Carpenter said. “This is top priority for me before the next session. This is a big thing, and we need to get it — and get it right.”

*Jason Alattidd is a Statehouse reporter for The Topeka Capital-Journal. He can be reached by email at jala-tidd@gannett.com. Follow him on X @Jason\_Alattidd.*