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Comments on the C & H Draft Environmental Assessment

By email: CHHogFarmComments@cardno-gs.com

C&H Hog Farms EA
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Friends of the North Fork and White Rivers (*Friends*) is a watershed protection organization focusing on the Middle Section of the White River. Friends is dedicated to the water quality of these rivers and the health of The Buffalo National River is a concern.

It is the observation of Friends that the FSA and SBA provided 75 to 95% loan guarantees for the C&H loans. This suggests that these federal agencies in essence are financial partners with C&H because of the financial risk if C&H were to fail. And, the FSA and SBA retained EESI to perform the EA and write the draft report. According to Mrs. Burack, the FSA and SBA were involved in the preparation of the report. The title page of the draft report shows the USDA and SBA as “preparers“ of the report.

It is reasonable to believe that the FSA and SBA would not want an EA commissioned by them to conclude there was significant risk to the environment from C&H. To have the EA conclude there is risk to the environment would mean the agencies erred in extending their loan guarantees enabling C&H to build the CAFO. Because of the role the agencies play in the preparation of the EA, it is reasonable to believe they influenced EESI in the information used or was omitted from the EA and EESI’s conclusions. Because of the manner in which this EA was prepared, we view its methodology and conclusions to have the appearance of significant bias.

The FSA and SBA, through a private contractor have failed to accurately identify and characterize the nature and extent of the significant adverse impacts this hog farm operation will have on groundwater quality within the Buffalo River Basin.

Friends agree the draft Environmental Assessment (EA) is flawed and in particular fails to engage in the alternatives analysis required under the National Environmental Policy Act (“NEPA”). We do not understand why additional extensive studies by the National Park Service (NPS) and Karst Hydrogeology of Buffalo National River (KHBNR) were not considered. Only preliminary test results from the incomplete study by Big Creek Research and Extension Team were used.

The EA conducted for the FSA and SBA lacks the involvement of persons licensed to practice geology in the State of Arkansas. The Arkansas State Law stating this requirement was enacted to protect the people and the state from persons lacking training and experience in geology and hydrogeologic work specific to Arkansas.

Friends respects the expertise and professional assessment of Dr. Tom Aley and reinforces concern that the entire hog farm and all (one exception) associated manure disposal fields are located on top of a well-developed karst aquifer within the Boone Formation and possibly other deeper geologic units.

The strategy utilized for monitoring surface water quality on Big Creek upstream and downstream of the farm is flawed as it ignores the predominant contribution of Hog Farm contaminants to the karst groundwater system and incorrectly presumes that contaminants would be present in Big Creek. During low flow or base-flow periods, groundwater becomes the predominant source of surface water in the Buffalo River.

NEPA requires that assessments be factual and technically credible. The strategy used in the EA does not comply with that basic requirement.

Dr. Aley raises valid concern for the risk of catastrophic failure of a manure holding pond. This risk has not been adequately established and more subsurface hydrogeologic investigation is needed. The EA incorrectly assumes there are no karst features beneath the holding ponds. Examples were given of sinkhole collapse beneath waste lagoons in area of the Ozarks underlain by the Boone formation.

Friends respectfully requests and urges an Environmental Impact Study be prepared by an independent non biased and qualified individual or organization taking into consideration all relevant studies. This study should include the entire acreage of the farming operation as well as all waters that receive contribution from groundwater emanating from the farm acreage and, as well, the wildlife in these areas.

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Friends of the North Fork and White Rivers is an Arkansas 501(c)(3) non-profit organization devoted to creating an ongoing dialogue where individuals, groups, and government agencies can work together to conserve, restore and enhance these beautiful rivers.