

Corporate Ohio is calling the shots

Tom Feran, Plain Dealer

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One of the surprises in "Mega farming," reporter Fran Henry's recent series in The Plain Dealer about the Ohio egg industry, was learning that the state had no rules governing factory farms until last August.

Until then, permits were issued case by case by the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency.
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After rules were imposed, the Ohio Department of Agriculture notified Buckeye Egg Farm, the state's biggest producer, that it was reviewing whether the problem-plagued megafarm should be allowed to keep operating. Its history of fly infestations, waste runoff and noxious odors has annoyed neighbors, embarrassed the industry and raised questions about safety.

A decision was due by April, but it hasn't come yet. Which will not shock anyone looking at a new film called "CorpOrNation," which is subtitled "The Story of Citizens and Corporations in Ohio."

One segment recounts how Amy Simpson of Cleveland Heights, a consumer advocate for the Ohio Public Interest Research Group, joined a class-action suit six years ago against Buckeye Farm that said the company was repackaging old eggs with fresh expiration dates. Affidavits said some of the repackaged eggs were as much as six months old and contained maggots.

Buckeye responded by suing Simpson and the research group under Ohio's "veggie libel" law, which bans anyone from making unfounded negative remarks about a food product. Buckeye quietly dropped the suit about a year later, after Simpson won support from the Ohio Newspaper Association, which believes the law violated free speech.

But the veggie law - never tested in court and similar to one cited by Texas cattle producers in their unsuccessful suit against Oprah Winfrey - remains in place.

The suit "was designed . . . to sort of shut me up," Simpson said. "These laws really give perishable products more rights than citizens."

That's not a major stretch, especially when extended to corporations behind products and services. Corporations not only have the rights of citizens, as "persons" under the law, they also have far greater resources, unlimited life spans and aren't threatened by jail.

Through political lobbying, investing in political and judicial campaigns and exchanging promises, corporations have become more powerful than the people to whom they were supposed to be subordinate.

In effect, in the words of "CorpOrNation," they have become the government.

"CorpOrNation" will not be reviewed as a big summer movie. As a 40-minute documentary, it's no "Matrix Reloaded" or "Charlie's Angels." It was produced by the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee, a religious-based social-action group making it available to individuals and community groups.

But the film is an eye-opener that deserves attention as lawmakers deal with matters affecting insurance, health care, education, the environment and countless other areas. A week away from the Fourth of July, it's a disquieting look at the state of democracy in a state whose General Assembly passed a law - in effect until 1959 - "to prevent the corruption of elections and political parties" by barring corporations from giving money directly or indirectly to any political party, organization or candidate.

The film tells how cash, lobbying and so-called issue advocacy brought corporations "growing power [that] enabled them to advocate laws with minimal reviews, perpetual life spans, limited liabilities and decreased citizen authority" - even turning regulatory agencies into a sort of shield against the public.

With budgets and resources controlled by corporate-influenced legislators, "regulatory agencies in Ohio are in a really tough position," Simpson says.

Which can leave citizens in a tougher one. Sometimes, for people such as the neighbors of Buckeye Farm, it really stinks.

The series "Megafarming" can be found at www.cleveland.com/indepth. Information about "CorpOrNation" is available at www.afsc.net or by calling 330-253-7151.

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