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## Organic 'Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations' – a thing of the past?

In August 2007, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) made headlines by reaching a consent agreement with one of the largest organic dairy companies in the USA to reform its farming practices. It came after a more than year-long investigation of Aurora Organic Dairy and a 'Notice of Proposed Revocation' issued 16 April 2007 by the USDA's National Organic Program (NOP).

The notice of revocation alleged 14 'willful violations' of NOP regulations. The agreement stated the violations reflected 'inconsistencies' between the company's Organic System Plan and NOP regulations, pointing to deficiencies by the company's farm certifier, the Colorado Department of Agriculture. The state government certifier agreed to increase staffing and training of its personnel, while Aurora Organic has a year to reform its practices. USDA said it could revoke Aurora's organic certification if it failed to do so.

This widely publicised agreement is the latest development in a long-running debate – or more accurately, conflict – over the precise way to define, practise and regulate organic dairy farming in the United States. The organic dairy business is the second largest sector of the US organic industry after produce, with \$2.1 billion in sales and growing at a rate of

24% annually, according to a 2006 survey by the Organic Trade Association.

Although Aurora was cited for many lapses, it has faced criticism for years over its practice of confining thousands of animals to feedlots, thereby adapting the model of conventional dairy production to organic farming. At its first facility in Platteville, Colorado, which had 5,200 animals at one point, lactating cows simply could not be grazed. The distance between pasture adequate for thousands of cows and the milking facility would have been too great for the animals to traverse. In any case, sufficient pasture acreage did not exist at the facility, which was originally a conventional Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) – a regulatory term for what critics call 'factory farms'.

Under the agreement, Aurora said it would cut the size of its already reduced herd in Platteville, from 2,200 to 1,250 cows, and increase its pasture to 400 acres (160 ha). It also agreed to graze all its cows under prescribed grazing rates of up to 5 cows per acre (2 cows/ha). Finally, it would cease bringing animals that had been improperly converted to organic status onto its farms. ■

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