

FROM CAFO DAIRY TO REGENERATIVE FARM



*Dominguez Dairy, Mesquite, NM (left), regenerative farm, Las Cruces (right).
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This land's story reflects the extractive history of dairy farming in the US. In the 70s, dairy families moved from California to New Mexico in search of water and more affordable land. CAFO (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) dairies sprung up in the desert, despite water becoming extremely scarce. The total number of dairy cows in New Mexico soared from 30,000 in the 1970s to over 300,000 dairy cows today. With an average of 2,700 cows per dairy, herd size in New Mexico is now the largest in the country, leading to overcrowding and associated health issues for cows.

Over the past decade however, demand for milk products has fallen while prices for water, feed and fuel have increased steeply. As a result, dozens of New Mexico dairies have gone out of business or succumbed to consolidation. Former feedlots are now abandoned, the land littered with trash heaps, degrading manure ponds, dilapidated buildings and defunct infrastructure. What used to be prime farmland is buried under an impenetrable 2 foot layer of compacted, anaerobic cow manure. As the land itself is being considered of no value, many owners are selling off water rights to out-of-state brokers. These disastrous environmental and social consequences of CAFO dairy farming for animals, farm families and surrounding communities need our attention!

New Mexico Agrarian Commons

creates affordable access to land, ensuring economic opportunities for historically displaced, disenfranchised or financially disadvantaged people with deference to Indigenous communities, people of color, and women. By holding land to provide long-term, affordable and secure lease tenure to farmers and ranchers for regenerative agriculture, the Commons is strengthening local food systems and ecology at the same time.

Our vision for this land is to reverse the harmful trajectory of CAFO dairies in our state, and to create a vibrant, viable alternative.

Where there is now wasteland we see a thriving collective farm built around the core tenets of social and environmental justice, community well-being, and ecological stewardship. Established farmers work next to beginners, sharing knowledge, equipment, and marketing opportunities. The land—once nursed back to health—is tended carefully to produce fresh fruits and vegetables for surrounding communities. A small-scale pasture-based dairy operation provides healthy milk, yogurt and cheese products. Animals thrive as soil health returns.



Dairy feedlot, Mesquite, New Mexico, CC BY 4.0 I.Jenniches

What is a CAFO Dairy?

The United States Department of Agriculture defines a CAFO as a concentrated animal feeding operation in which over 1,000 animal units are confined for over 45 days a year. Instead of grazing on pasture or rangeland, CAFO dairy cows are fed hay, corn silage and byproducts from the food supply chain that humans can't eat. The large number and concentration of animals raises serious concerns over animal welfare and creates major environmental issues associated with manure handling and disposal.

Low income and minority populations suffer disproportionately from proximity to CAFOs and the resulting public health impacts, such as water and air pollution and waste.

The Decline of New Mexico Dairies

Robert Hagevoort, Professor and Extension Dairy Specialist at NM State University says: "New Mexico was home to about 180 dairies in 2004, but consolidation has reduced that number to around 100 dairy operations at the beginning of 2023. That is a loss of about 40% of the operations in almost 20 years. [...]"

Many industry analysts point to diminishing water availability and resulting increase in production costs in New Mexico at the southwestern edge of the Ogallala, as one of the primary reasons for these changing dynamics."¹

¹The State of the Dairy Industry in New Mexico: pandemic turbulence was the prelude for the storm to follow. (September 2023)
<https://dairy.nmsu.edu/>

Within this Crisis lies Opportunity

Contact the New Mexico Agrarian Commons to learn more and get involved:

Chihuahuan Desert Charities, Naya's Refuge, and New Mexico Healthy Soil have created the New Mexico Agrarian Commons in partnership with the Agrarian Trust.

The Commons realizes an innovative and robust model of shared land ownership intertwining agriculture, ecological stewardship, environmental and social justice, and community well-being.

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LEARN MORE:

NMhealthysoil.org/land-access/



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