

November 23 , 2010

Sierra Club Michigan Chapter Statement on Vreba-Hoff Transfer

LANSING, MI - Last week, Rabo AgriFinance, Inc., informed Michigan DNRE officials they have taken possession of the three Vreba-Hoff Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, Vreba Hoff1 and 2, and Waldron Dairy. They are seeking to have the "operation permits" transferred to their wholly owned subsidiary, Southern Michigan Dairies, LLC.

The 3000 remaining cows are now at Vreba-Hoff II in Hillsdale County. But the manure and other animal waste remains at VH-I and Waldron, millions of gallons of it sitting in pits. Under previous court order, the water is to be treated and it must meet permit standards before it is applied to the land. Unfortunately, the "treated water" has never met the permit standards. Instead, the more solid manure and animal waste in the pits is being land-applied as a slurry. It's unknown what will happen to all the filthy water that doesn't meet the permit water quality standards.

Will Rabo AgriFinance, Inc., or Southern Michigan Dairies, LLC, suddenly be able to treat and dispose of all that filthy water safely, without triggering yet more environmental violations? No matter who owns the leftovers, it all must be safely disposed. Plus, those 3000 remaining cows are still producing milk, and they're still producing yet more manure and other waste. Lots and lots of it.

To add more confusion and uncertainty to this whole situation, a Memorandum of Option Agreement (http://www.michigan.sierraclub.org/pdfs/WaterSentinels/Memorandum_Option_Agreement_Nov2010.pdf), without any details made public, was signed between Southern Michigan Dairies, LLC (Cedar Falls, Iowa) and Nova Lait, LLC (Waseon, Ohio). Southern Michigan Dairies LLC has granted to WHM Van Bakel certain rights and options to purchase their interest in the real property, ie. the CAFOs. So Mr. Van Bakel has an option to buyback the same properties that AgriFinance has taken over.

What can Michigan residents expect with these dairies' management in flux? The first two failed, with literally hundreds of environmental violations related to manure and other animal waste that was discharged to waters of the state. First the Vander Hoffs, then Willy Van Bakel, and they each had several different managers in succession. None of them ever brought the dairies into compliance with clean water laws. The state long ago threw up their hands in frustration, and sued. Though many court battles have ensued, nothing has changed, the violations continue to accrue. For the whole long list, check out <http://nocafos.org/news.htm>.

It's as yet unknown what Rabo AgriFinance, Inc. plans to do. The Sierra Club sincerely hopes that whatever happens, and who ever owns the CAFOs, that they're made to do what has not yet been possible - either clean up this operation, or shut it down for good.