

Have Hogs Caused Milford Maladies?

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The incidence of certain illnesses in Milford was 20 times higher than the state average in 1997, according to a new study by the Utah Department of Health.

The report by the state's Bureau of Epidemiology also found that between 1992 and 1998, Milford generally had higher rates of diarrhea-causing and respiratory illnesses than Utah in general and two similar-size communities: Parowan and Panguitch.

Critics of Circle Four Farms' giant hog operation near Milford claimed Tuesday that the report lends new support to their suspicion that air or water pollution from the facility is affecting the health of nearby residents.

But Craig Nichols, state epidemiologist, cautioned that too little is known at this point to blame anyone. The challenge now is to carefully track medical cases in the Milford area and try to figure out what is causing the increased rates of those diseases, he said.

Circle Four Farms spokesman Brian Mauldwin noted Tuesday that the study found evidence of increased rates of illness in Milford since 1992 -- two years before the first hogs arrived.

"There isn't any data pointing the finger at Circle Four, or anyone else for that matter," said Mauldwin.

Beaver County Commissioner Mark Whitney called the report worrisome.

"It says our rates of these diseases are much higher than anywhere in the state," said Whitney, a Milford resident. "If those are correct figures, it should be of concern to everyone in the community."

Byron Muir, another Milford resident, said a series of recent studies have eliminated all potential sources of bacterial infection except Circle Four Farms and a landfill near town. He suspects that wastes containing dangerous bacteria are seeping from the sewage lagoons at the hog farm and spreading through the valley, and says the new study backs up that position.

"Just one of Circle Four's sewage lagoons is larger than all the septic tanks in the county," said Muir. "If they are 99 percent perfect, that remaining 1 percent could be causing the problem."

But the possibility of contaminated groundwater has been studied extensively and no evidence of a problem has been found, said Dennis Frederick, manager of the groundwater-protection section for the Utah Division of Water Quality.

The health research analyzed hospital discharge records from 1992 to 1998 for Milford, Panguitch, Parowan and the whole state. Those records provide a general explanation of why a patient was hospitalized. Investigators pulled all records for certain types of respiratory and diarrheal illnesses, and calculated the overall rate of disease for each area.

The worst year for Milford residents was 1997, when the incidence of diarrheal illness was 409 per 10,000 residents. In Panguitch, the rate was 70 per 10,000; in Parowan it was 29 per 10,000; and in Utah as a whole it was 20 per 10,000.

Put another way, Milford residents had 20 times more diarrheal illness than Utahns as a whole in 1997.

A similar pattern was reported in 1997 for respiratory illness. In Milford the incidence of respiratory illness was 517 per 10,000 residents. In Parowan, the rate was 169 per 10,000; in Panguitch it was 103 per 10,000; and in Utah as a whole it was 73 per 10,000. In other words, the rate of respiratory illness in Milford was seven times higher than the state average.

Nichols said the next step is to carefully track illness in the Milford area. Doctors and patients there are being encouraged to report to the state all cases of respiratory and diarrheal illness and send in samples for analysis. Only by carefully examining those cases will researchers be able to determine what is causing the problem.

"If it is coming from typical sources, then we'll know at least that it is not related to the hog farm," said Nichols. "If we get a new organism that we don't normally check for, it may send the investigation in an entirely new direction."