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POLITICS

Sonoma loves its farms. Activists call them factories. Could a ballot measure upend this county?

If it passes, Measure J would force large farms in Sonoma County to close or downsize within three years. Opponents say it's a smokescreen for a more extreme agenda.
Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

By **Aviva Bechky**, Staff writer
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Gift Article

In dimly lit indoor aisles at Weber Family Farms in Petaluma, hundreds of thousands of white chickens live out their 90 weeks of life. They fly from perch to perch. They dust bathe in the bedding. They nip at water dispensers. They lay egg after egg.

And they never leave.

These barns are at the heart of a bitter fight that Mike Weber and Samantha Faye are waging for the future of local farming.

To Weber, the fourth-generation steward of the farm, these birds are his heritage. When he walks by the house he grew up in and the buildings he and his brother inherited, he sees animals treated well. He's happy to show them off.

Faye, a Santa Rosa resident and member of the combative animal rights group Direct Action Everywhere, sees Weber Family Farms very differently. In her eyes, cramming so many birds together without letting them go outside is inherently cruel. Like Weber, she wants to raise awareness of farm conditions, but she's hoping people will conclude large farms like his should be shut down.

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In November, Sonoma County voters will decide this debate. A first-of-its-kind ballot measure asks: Should large animal farms exist in the county? If Measure J passes, the biggest Sonoma farms — those with more than 700 dairy cattle or 82,000 laying hens — would have to downsize or close within three years. No new large farms could open.

Left: Fourth-generation Petaluma farmer Mike Weber, who grew up on the Weber Family Farms property, said Measure J is "punch in the gut." Right: A sign in opposition of Measure J. A local said "No on J" signs have been torn down.
Photos by Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

It's a potential watershed moment. Measure J would be one of the first ordinances in the United States to ban "concentrated animal feeding operations," or CAFOs, sometimes referred to as factory farms. (Berkeley, which has no CAFOs, is voting on a similar measure.)

Only a small percentage of Sonoma County farms would be directly forced to shutter: probably fewer than 20, though the number is disputed. But they are some of the largest farms in a county where agriculture drives the economy and defines local identity. Popular producers including Straus Family Creamery and Clover Sonoma said the measure would threaten their long-term business.

Animal rights activists, including the Berkeley-headquartered Direct Action Everywhere, are fighting an uphill battle to pass Measure J. But should they succeed, it would be a significant victory. They argue that CAFOs, by concentrating many animals in one space, are disastrous for the environment, for public health, for smaller farms — and above all, for the animals.

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But in Sonoma County's entrenched agricultural community, Measure J is seen as an existential threat. Farmers say that farm management, not size, determines animal welfare and environmental impact. The measure would shut down several family operations, which they say would be especially unjust in a county where farmers set the standard nationwide for organic, eco-friendly practices. As of Aug. 25, Measure J opponents — who are supported by the political establishment, Democrats and Republicans alike — had raised about $1 million to fight it, about five times the sum that supporters reported.

To Faye, Measure J is "really exciting." To Weber, it's a "punch in the gut." For activists and farmers more broadly, it's the culmination of a yearslong fight in Sonoma County that has involved protests, legal battles and even jail time.

And for voters, Measure J is a chance to answer a question they've never before been asked: Are CAFOs, which produce an estimated 90% or more of the country's livestock and poultry, an ethical way to farm?

Samantha Faye, a Sonoma County native and proponent of Measure J, says she believes large farms treat animals cruelly.
Brian L. Frank/Special to the Chronicle

The land by Weber's Liberty Road farm is dotted with cattle and sheep — plus a few "No on J" signs.

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Local family agriculture in Sonoma County dates back more than a century. By 1945, the county had about 6,000 poultry producers, according to Thea Lowry's book "Empty Shells: The Story of Petaluma, America's Chicken City."

But over the next 50-odd years, according to Lowry, small farms consolidated. Some grew; others vanished. "Agriculture has become agribusiness," she wrote.

That reflects a long-standing trend in animal agriculture of breeding animals that produce more milk, eggs and meat while developing structures that accommodate massive numbers of animals. It led to more efficient animal agriculture — and what activists term the modern "factory farm."

"We have an extremely high saturation of animals that exist within totally discrete areas, in, like, a shed," Faye said.

To her, that's inhumane. But farmers disagree that having many animals in one spot signifies poor welfare.

They point out that a CAFO is not actually defined by animal welfare conditions. Instead, it's an animal waste-related term from the Environmental Protection Agency. Farm size is the primary qualification: Large CAFOs, for instance, might have more than 30,000 ducks or 700 mature dairy cows.

Medium and small CAFOs must also meet specific waste discharge requirements. In Sonoma County, regional water quality control boards have identified no such farms.

Supporters of Measure J see a litany of problems with CAFOs and modern farming writ large.

Left: Organic eggs await inspection at Weber Family Farms. Right: Farmer Mike Weber said he provides eggs to much of the Bay Area.
Photos by Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

The way the animals are bred, they say, is unhealthy: Cows produce too much milk for their bodies to sustain; hens lay too many eggs; broiler chickens grow too fast. Some animals never see the outdoors. Farms allow disease to spread, cruelly separate calves from their mothers and pollute with manure — the larger the operation, the worse the damage.

"We want to set a limit," said Cassie King, the communications lead for Direct Action Everywhere. "There's nothing to stop these facilities that are already so large from getting even bigger."

Farmers dispute these claims. They take stringent biosecurity measures: Visitors to Weber's farms must don Tyvek suits and foot protection to enter the barns. The California State Water Resources Control Board and its regional bodies regulate dairies' liquid waste management. And animal rights activists just don't understand some standard practices such as calf separation, farmers said.

If activists see specific problems in Sonoma County, opponents argue, they should write a narrow measure that targets those issues instead.

"This measure doesn't address water quality. This measure doesn't address animal welfare. It simply just looks at farms and says, 'If you get big enough in size, you just can't operate that way,'" said Dayna Ghirardelli, executive director of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau.

Complicating the debate is the challenge of identifying which farms would close.

Permitting authorities like the California State Water Resources Control Board don't have a clear CAFO database. The Coalition to End Factory Farming, a group that organized to support Measure J, identified 21 potential CAFOs, but some farmers said not all their locations on the list would qualify.

Opponents of Measure J also dispute the accuracy of calling the CAFOs "factory farms." Faye pointed to Petaluma Poultry, a subsidiary of Perdue Farms, as exemplifying a corporate farm where Direct Action Everywhere has alleged animal cruelty. But many other names on the list have been owned by generations of Sonoma County locals.

Underlying the debate is a long-festering distrust between animal rights activists and Sonoma County farmers. The Measure J political fight is just the latest battle.

Left: A worker moves chicken manure into a pile as it awaits processing into fertilizer at Weber Family Farms. Right: Here in the conventional barns have at least one square foot of space each.
Photos by Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

In 2018, Direct Action Everywhere activists stormed Weber's farm.

They forced their way onto the property, seizing hens. They took photos and videos to post online. They alleged that the chickens were cannibalizing each other — a stress behavior — and covered in feces. After they were arrested, they made their case in court that this sort of "open rescue" to save animals from suffering should be legal.

That incident — one instance in the group's larger nationwide strategy of break-ins — cemented Weber's views of the activists. A deliberate speaker who's comfortable bending down to check chicken litter while holding a conversation, Weber is normally happy talking about his farm. But trying to reason with activists doesn't seem worth it to him anymore.

"How can we ever sit down at the table and see eye to eye?" Weber asked. "You're really looking across the table at an arsonist. At the end of the day, they just want to burn down your operation."

Faye saw something different in the break-in at Weber's. A Sonoma County native, she had grown up on her grandfather's dairy farm and had returned in 2014 from working on a pig farm in the Czech Republic, an experience that convinced her to go mostly vegan. Back in Santa Rosa, she received an alert about the protest at Weber Family Farms.

"That was one of the coolest things I'd ever seen," she said.

So she got involved with Direct Action Everywhere. The group is known for its militant approach to exposing suspect farms and for accusations of grooming young members in a cultlike environment. In recent years, Faye said she has worked less with the group, but as she campaigns for Measure J, she regularly uses photos from the group's 2018 break-in as evidence.

Agriculture is at the heart of the identity of Petaluma and the rest of Sonoma County. But even though the region is often touted as a leader of responsible farming, some animal rights activists believe its large farms should be shut down.
Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

The images are featured on the Coalition to End Factory Farming website: the long barns that line Weber's property, chickens crowded together and a hen "covered in feces."

In court testimony last year, Weber did admit some of his birds had picked at each other before the break-in. This is different from flock cannibalism, which by definition is widespread, he said.

According to Richard Blatchford, who works on poultry management at UC Davis, the conditions in those pictures appear normal. Birds do occasionally poop on one another, he said, though the hen in question may have been ill. And parts of chicken barns can look crowded even when the birds have more space elsewhere: "They like to clump together," he said.

Even when activists and farmers agree about animals' conditions, they often disagree about the ethics.

Weber's birds live cage-free but mostly inside. His organic barns have at least 1.2 square feet per bird. The conventional buildings, with smaller birds, have one square foot apiece — enough for the chickens to move around, but small enough to sometimes look crowded. Organic chickens usually spend time outside, but because of avian flu risk, the California Department of Food and Agriculture recommended suspending that for now.

On average, Weber said, less than one-tenth of a percent of his birds — fewer than 500 out of 500,000 — die each week, which he called typical but activists termed alarming.

To Measure J's proponents, it's impossible for so many animals raised in one place to be treated well. And merely meeting industry standards doesn't mean farm conditions are ethical, said veterinarian Dr. Crystal Heath, the executive director of veterinary advocacy and animal rights group Our Honor.

"It seems like producers nowadays no longer hold you to this idea of animal stewardship," she said.

Left: Carla Cabral, an organizer with the Coalition to End Factory Farming, shared photos of animals said to be abused at farms in Sonoma County, during a canvassing event at Santa Rosa Junior College. Right: Measure J would ban large farms in Sonoma County if it passes in November.
Photos by Brian L. Frank/Special to the Chronicle

On a recent Monday morning, Faye stood behind a table near a library at Santa Rosa Junior College. She had attended the school about 10 years ago before dropping out, getting married and landing a job on a Sebastopol blueberry farm. Now she was back, nursing a migraine but determined to campaign.

Dressed in a casual jean jacket and assured in her message, she called out to every passing student.

"We're the Yes on Measure J campaign," Faye explained excitedly. "We're just trying to phase out the largest concentrated animal feeding operations so that we can focus more on having small farms here."

Her pitch cut straight to a key question of Measure J: Would replacing CAFOs with smaller farms improve animal welfare? Heath and Faye contend that it would.

But small farms, especially dairies, said they follow practices very similar to their larger local counterparts. By and large, they oppose Measure J.

Susan Bianchi, an owner of Bianchi Dairy, deemed Measure J a "threat" to "our way of life." Bronte Edwards of Rainbow Family Ranching Co. said that it would cause the loss of "foundational pieces of our food system." Jennifer Beretta, assistant herdswoman at Beretta Family Dairy, called it "really scary."

They worry people could erroneously label them out of compliance with Measure J. And they also fear the "trickle-down effect": the idea that without the area's biggest farms, feed companies and veterinarians would leave Sonoma County.

The Coalition to End Factory Farming website lists only one commercial farm in support of the measure: Green Goose Farm in Penngrove. Owner

Roy Smith said he wrestled with his decision. He opposes large industrial poultry farms but said he thinks Sonoma County's larger dairies operate at the same high standard as its smaller ones.

They certainly use similar techniques. For instance, animal rights activists are vocally opposed to separating calves from their mothers and isolating them in hutches: small individual pens with a contained outdoor space. Erik Allen, a coalition organizer, said he once heard a cow scream for its calf for a week on a Petaluma farm — an experience that radicalized him.

But even at the organic Beretta farm, which has only 340 mature dairy cows, Beretta was unashamed to show off her calves as they walked in their hutches and occasionally mooed. (Unlike some hutches, Beretta's let calves turn around.) The animals have to be separated from their mothers, she said, because otherwise they drink too much of the milk.

Fed up with the arguments from pro-Measure J activists, she said, "Please come and look and tell me what we could do different." She just participated in a study on whether raising calves as duos in larger hutches could improve their quality of life. But for now, this is the most practical approach Beretta knows.

In her eyes, it doesn't make sense to target only larger farms for practices almost all dairies use. Instead, Beretta sees activists' professed support for small farms as a smokescreen to hide the coalition's true goal: ending animal farming altogether.

"They do not want animal agriculture," she said. "But we are in the United States of America, and we should be able to choose what we want to eat."

Protesters stormed Weber Family Farms in 2018 to call attention to what they called cruel conditions.
Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

Nowhere on its website does the Coalition to End Factory Farming float the idea of ending farming entirely. Nor does every member support it.

But Direct Action Everywhere, whose San Francisco Bay Area chapter helped found the coalition, is taking a leading role in the campaign. And the group makes no secret of its goal to eliminate animal agriculture by 2040.

"Once the precedent is set and people see that factory farming is unnecessary," King said, "hopefully other counties, other states, other places will follow suit." She envisions a food system "a lot more based on plants."

However, Measure J on its own would not force such a future. It's hard to say how precisely Sonoma County's food supply would be affected, in part because it's hard to say how many farms are CAFOs.

With large farms gone within three years, more meat, eggs and dairy from CAFOs outside the county might be shipped in, though Faye argued that smaller farms could step up and fill the market. Prices for local products might rise — perhaps a boon for remaining farms, but a blow for the farm-to-table movement that blossomed in Sonoma County.

People on both sides of Measure J offer sensational narratives: Local farming will disappear; local farming will be minimally impacted. Practically the only thing uncontested is the tension between these factions.

Weber said he has seen drones and strange cars circling his property, which he blamed on activists. A neighbor said "No on J" signs have been torn down. On the other side, supporters said they're hesitant to publicly attach their name to the measure because they've been harassed. Opponents shouted obscenities at them at the county fair.

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From Faye: "Creating equity within the food system is going to have to start with the truth."

From Weber: "When people hear the truth, then they're like, 'I get it. I understand. And I stand with you.'"

But will voters be able to discern the truth? After all, most have never seen Weber Family Farms.

Buyers know only the finished product: pristine white eggs, scrubbed of blood and dirt. Packed by the dozen, they're either the symbol of a family's hard work or the outcome of an unethical system — depending on whom you ask.

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Aviva Bechky is an intern on the food and wine team. They are a rising senior at Northwestern University, where they study journalism, data science, and gender and sexuality studies. They most recently worked as a general assignment intern at Block Club Chicago and as a features intern at the Seattle Times. Hailing from Maryland, Bechky also spent a summer writing for District Fray Magazine in Washington, D.C. At their college paper, the Daily Northwestern, they served in several roles, including print managing editor, city editor, and development and recruitment editor. Outside the newsroom, they enjoy knitting, cooking and watching "Star Trek."

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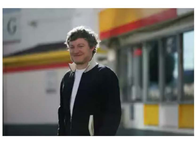

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