Controversial "Ag Gag" bill considered in Iowa

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The Iowa Senate is considering a state law that would criminalize the reporting of abusive conditions at animal or crop operations.

Several citizen and food transparency groups in Iowa have opposed the law, which they have dubbed the "Whistle Blower Suppression Bill" and the "Ag Gag Bill." Strong support for the measure is coming from multinational corporations like Monsanto and Dupont, as well as statewide organizations like the Iowa Poultry Association.

The bill, HF 589, passed the Iowa House of Representatives in 2011. It now moves to the state Senate (as SF 431) and is expected to pass with some ammendments in 2012.

Criminalizing concern

Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, an organization opposing the bill, cited the many times neighbors of agricultural operations have aided state regulators by documenting extreme abuses to animals or the land. This legislation would make those concerned neighbors into felons if they take pictures or audio recordings of what is happening near their homes.

According to Source Media News, state Senator Matt McCoy (D-Des Moines) called the legislation "problematic," saying that HF 589 punishes agricultural workers who blow the whistle on corruption. "The burden is placed upon the employee. I just think that’s unreasonable and it makes criminals out of people."

Special treatment for Big Ag

The "Ag Gag" bill would criminalize the production, possession or distribution of any audio or video recording taken at a crop or animal facility without the owner's permission. In addition, the bill defines a broad range of already illegal activities — such as trespassing, theft and fraud — as "animal/crop facility tampering" and would place harsher penalties on these crimes than if they are committed anywhere else in the state.

There are exemptions in the bill for parties who have a financial stake in the matter. This means that if Monsanto is monitoring a farmer's activities, it is still legal. But if a neighbor exposes abuse or pollution, they could face up to two years in jail — and that's for a first offense!

Iowa is one of four states where similar legislation has been proposed. The measures have stalled in Florida and Minnesota, but one is currently being considered in New York state.

Take Action » If you are in Iowa, please take a stand against the "Ag Gag" bill. Tell your legislators you oppose HF 589.

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