

# Runoff Control - Costs and Consequences

Thousands of U. S. livestock producers face investments in runoff control facilities and added operating costs as a result of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act Amendments Enacted by Congress in 1972. This act charged the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) with developing a broad national program to eliminate water pollution.

Guidelines for point source runoff control have since been drawn up, and they apply to all livestock operators with runoff problems at production sites. Left uncontrolled, runoff from livestock production sites can transport animal wastes from feeding and holding areas to creekbeds and streams.

Many questions have been asked about the guidelines and about their economic impact on livestock operators and consumers. How much will controls cost livestock producers? Will some be forced to call it quits? Would the dairy, fed beef, and hog industries face serious disruption? And what about consumer prices?

The surface water control guidelines, which were drafted by the EPA last fall, are aimed at stopping point source discharges. They require producers with surface water problems—where runoff from feeding and holding areas can enter rivers, lakes, and streams—to install facilities that are sufficient to contain runoff from major rainfalls by July

1977.

The specific guidelines for 1977 call for containment of runoff from a 10-year, 24-hour storm event (in major livestock areas, generally amounts to 2 1/2-5 1/2 inches of rain during a 24-hour period). The facilities must also contain process waste water, such as wash water from dairy operations.

**Big operators only.** As now proposed, point source control guidelines apply only to very large producers with more than 1,000 beef animals, 700 dairy cows, or 2,500 hogs. But later this year, guidelines will be proposed for smaller units. Eventually all procedures may be covered.

If all producers had to comply with currently proposed guidelines, it would involve a total initial investment of an estimated \$750 million. The investment in runoff control facilities would fall on some 280,000 dairymen, cattle feeders, and hog farmers.

While the facilities required to meet guidelines would vary with size, type, and location of the livestock operation, most runoff control systems would feature four basic components:

- diversion terraces to prevent fresh water from flowing across production sites and open lots,
- settling basins to collect settleable solids in runoff,
- retention ponds to catch and temporarily store runoff and waste water, and
- pumps and irrigation equipment to periodically empty the holding ponds and distribute the effluent onto farmland.

The costs of installing these systems would fall heaviest on small producers. For example, of the estimated \$133 million that the fed beef industry would have to invest to comply with EPA guidelines, more than two-thirds would be borne by feeders selling fewer than 100 head per year. In the hog

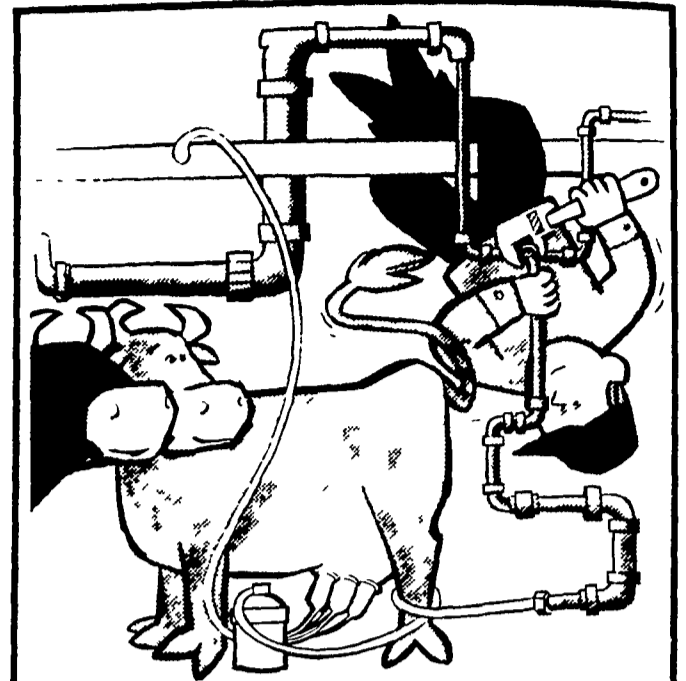
industry, four-fifths of the total \$280 million investment would be required of producers selling fewer than 500 head per year.

Experts say that the added costs of runoff control could force many small producers out of the livestock business. As many as 60 percent of the hog producers with runoff problems are small volume operators with high unit costs. And additional investments per animal are much higher for smaller volume producers. For example, small beef producers (under 100 head) might have to invest as much as \$145 per head while large producers would have to invest only \$3 per head.

**Drop out anyway.** Some of the producers that can withstand the added financial burden may decide to drop out of the industry. For some, uncertainty about future environmental controls, such as nonpoint source control guidelines, may cause them to postpone investment decisions. Others may opt for concentrating production resources in other farm enterprises such as grain production.

In the short run, the economic impact of runoff controls would be greatest for dairy and swine producers. If producers left the livestock industry in large numbers, supplies of dairy products and pork would tighten considerably.

(Continued on Page 44)



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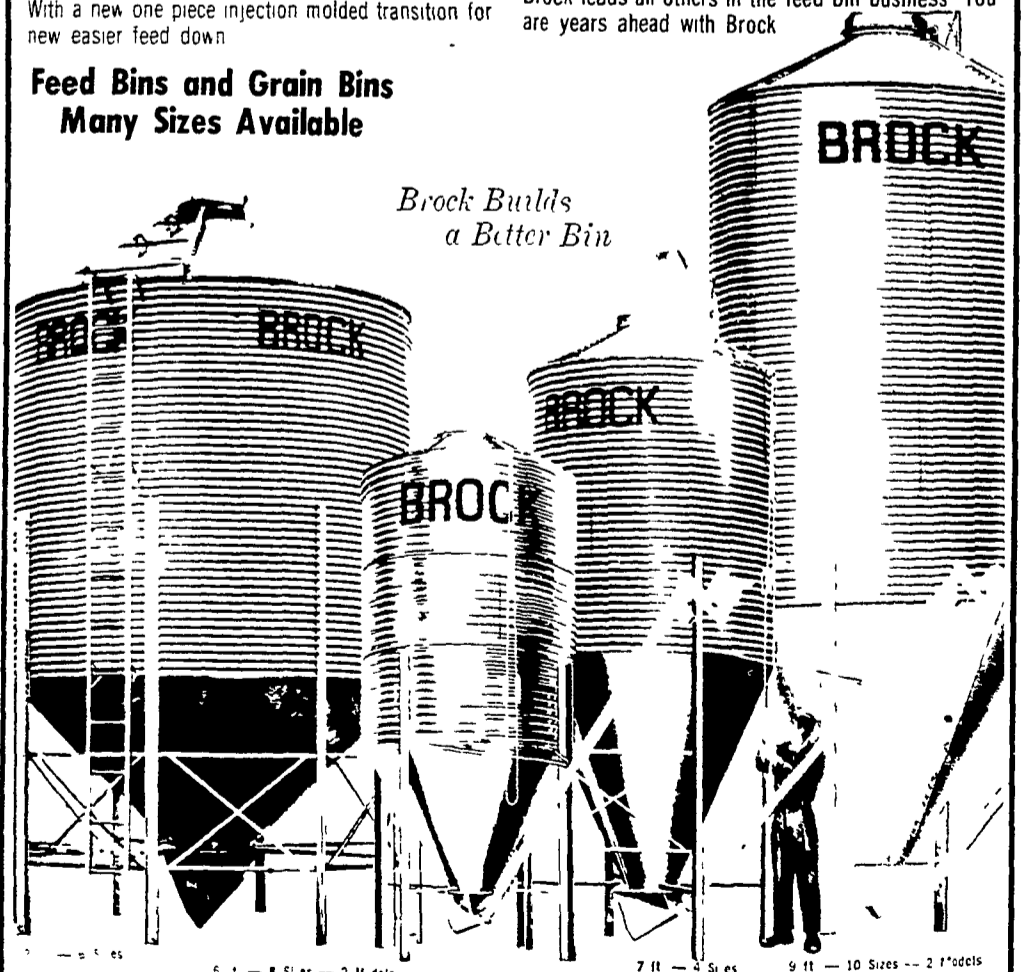
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