My name is Peg Sheaffer and I am opposed to the proposed legislation. My husband and I had the privilege to derive our entire income from farming for 19 years. I strongly disagree with attempts to frame this as a conversation that puts farmers on one side and everybody else on the other. The organizations that were given the opportunity to weigh in—the Dairy Business Association, the Dairy Alliance and others—represent only a small subset of farmers—those with enough money and power to have full time lobbyists at the capitol.

I came here today to represent not only my views, but also the views of many of my friends and neighbors in Green and Rock Counties. In the course of the last 24 hours, I have been on the phone with and exchanged emails with more than 2 dozen people about this legislation. Among those I talked to is my best friend Jen Riemer, who farms with her husband Bryce and their 3 kids on Bryce’s family’s 3rd generation family farm.

When I talked to Jen yesterday, she hadn’t heard that there was a hearing today. That was no surprise given the expedited timeline for this bill. We talked about the bill, and Jen asked me if I would tell you her story. She couldn’t be here today because she is at home feeding and bedding steers. Jen and Bryce are full-time farmers in Green County. After graduating from college and working in the city for a few years, they moved back to the family farm in 2011 to continue the business that Bryce’s grandfather started in 1927.

They were living their dream, until one day in 2016 when a man from Nebraska showed up in their driveway to inform them that he intended to build, right across the road, a confinement facility for 6,000 cows and 4 manure pits to store the 85 million gallons of manure that those cows would produce every year. And that’s exactly what happened. The facility was built, despite the environmental and public health concerns—many of them expressed by the County and the Town—associated with the livestock facility.

As it turns out, the Town’s health and safety concerns—namely impacts to water and air—have indeed proven to be well-founded. I want to tell you about another conversation I had this morning to help illustrate what I mean by that. This morning I talked with Anna Anderson, Chair of the Sylvester Town Board at the time the livestock facility submitted their application. She found out about today’s hearing last night—too late to arrange to take off from work. It is important to note that the Towns Association does not speak for all of the many smart, committed and well-informed men and women like Ms Anderson who serve on their town boards, and on this issue, they certainly don’t speak for her.

Ms Anderson was at the very center of the issue we are discussing today, and she wants you to know that the Sylvester Town Board took its responsibility to protect health and safety seriously. So seriously, in fact, that they convened a committee to study the potential impacts of large livestock facilities on the Town. Among other findings, the committee found that the low-lying nature of much of the Town—it is essentially a bowl-shaped wetland—meant that there could be significant impacts to air and water quality if a large livestock facility were to be sited there.
Even though the Town possessed scientific information about the way that gases emitted by large concentrations of manure—hydrogen sulfide, methane and ammonia—could have detrimental effects on the health of the people living in the area, the process for effectuating their statutory authority to protect the health and safety of their constituents was unclear at best. Ultimately the Town was forced to give in. I am here to tell you that Ms Anderson and many others who serve in local government don’t want the little bit of control they currently have to be taken away; What they want is for the legislature, DNR, and DATCP to provide more guidance on how to exercise their authority. Sylvester Township didn’t have that guidance, and they were forced to give in.

My friend Jen Riemer and her family now live alongside a CAFO, and they have paid the price over and over again for a livestock facility siting process that pays little heed to the concerns of local communities. The latest incident happened on a day last fall when their three little girls started feeling sick—their heads hurt and they were dizzy. The adults started feeling sick too. The CAFO had been spreading manure heavily all around the Riemer farm that day, and the manure gases had settled in the surrounding low-lying area and were making them sick. They were forced to pack up the kids and go to town where they spent the day waiting out the toxic fumes.

A representative from the CAFO heard what had happened (word travels fast in a small community) and called the next day to apologize. It’s one thing to sit in these hearing rooms and talk in metaphorical terms about young people fleeing rural areas for one reason or another, but this is a very literal example of a family having to flee their home as a result of the deliberate decision to disregard the input of local communities on livestock siting issues.

In closing, I want to reiterate my opposition to this legislation. I am not fooled by those who claim that this bill benefits everybody and not just CAFO operators. I am not fooled, and neither, I suspect, are the many rural Wisconsinites who will suffer if this bill becomes law.

Thank you.