The Ethical Dilemma of Supreme Beef’s Cattle Feedlot

Supreme Beef, LLC’s proposed 11,000+ cattle feedlot near Bloody Run Creek has caused its fair share of controversy over the last four years and has forced the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) to consider the feedlot’s business and environmental implications on the region. I recommend that the IDNR prevent Supreme Beef, LLC from building their cattle feedlot, as it would do excessive damage to the surrounding natural waters, including the Bloody Run Creek, and would directly contradict the values our organization stands for.

Decisions such as this one can be analyzed under the four frameworks of ethical decision making developed by Joseph Badaracco: Net/Net, Individual Rights, Character and Reality-Based decisions. Net/Net prompts the decision-maker to choose the solution that will do the most good and the least harm to stakeholders involved. Individual Rights is the next framework, and accounts for the rights an individual has that should not be violated by decisions made. In his third framework, Badaracco focuses on the character of the decision-maker and how the choices an organization makes speak for its values and integrity. Finally, Badaracco’s fourth framework has one consider what will work in the world as it is and subsequently make a decision based on reality. Each of these frameworks can provide different insights on how the IDNR can approach this decision; however, I found the Net/Net and Character frameworks best for evaluating the situation and making the best choice for all parties involved. These two frameworks respect the mission of the organization and the long-term goals that we hope to achieve at the IDNR.
Once I decided which frameworks I would utilize in my decision making process, I needed to determine the possible actions that could be taken once a decision was reached. Ultimately, there are three courses of actions we could take as an organization: letting Supreme Beef go forward with their cattle feedlot as is, letting Supreme Beef build on the condition they reincorporate an anaerobic digester into their feedlot, or blocking their plans all together.

Through examining the situation using Badarco’s Net/Net framework, I have concluded that blocking Supreme Beef’s plan altogether would create the most good and least harm for the highest number of stakeholders that are involved. The primary groups affected by this decision are Supreme Beef, LLC and its employees, residents of Clayton and Allamakee counties, and those who go trout fishing in the creek. As each option is considered, it becomes clear that Supreme Beef’s plan for managing manure and food waste would negatively impact the local water system, including Bloody Run Creek - a cost that would far outweigh the benefits of bringing jobs to Northeast Iowa.

The Bloody Run Creek is a prime area for trout fishing in Iowa, drawing many fishermen to the area and, in turn, stimulating the economy. Additionally, the land that the proposed feedlot sits on top of is karst topography land, defined as a “type of landscape where the dissolving of the bedrock has created sinkholes, sinking streams, caves, springs, and other characteristic features” (“Karst Landscapes”). If we allowed Supreme Beef to go forward with their plan as is, the manure from the cattle combined with the features of the landscape would cause waste to seep into the local water system. Local residents, like Tammy Thompson, are concerned about this: “She’s worried the project's 39-million-gallon lagoon will leak, polluting her and her neighbors’ wells” (Eller). Damaging the local ecosystem and water supply would harm many community members and pollute an essential resource that is necessary for day-to-day living.
Another solution is allowing Supreme Beef to build the feedlot, provided they placed anaerobic digesters on the land to convert waste into natural gas. While the digesters would help mitigate environmental issues, Supreme Beef unfortunately does not have the greatest track record when it comes to complying with our environmental standards. The IDNR has already fined their previous parent company, Walz Energy, on two separate occasions; once in 2018 after violating policies on illegal discharge and stormwater drainage, and again in 2019 after violating the consent decree that came out of the first violations. While anaerobic digesters would prevent problems with the water supply, Supreme Beef’s unstable track record makes it hard to trust them on following through with this modified plan.

The final option is to deny Supreme Beef a permit to build all together. This is the option I believe will bring the most good and least harm to those involved. Firstly, the Bloody Run Creek would not have any manure and waste fed into it, ensuring that its ecosystem would see no negative effect, the locals could trust the water quality, and the trout population would remain stable. The downside of this decision would be that Supreme Beef would take their business elsewhere, leading to a loss in jobs for the local economy. However, as the IDNR, it is our duty to protect the Bloody Run Creek for future generations to enjoy. While the owners and employees of Supreme Beef would consider this situation a loss, countless Iowans would be winners, as they could enjoy the Bloody Run Creek for years to come.

When making our decision, it is also important to consider the message we want to send about the IDNR’s character and values. The mission statement of the IDNR is “to conserve and enhance our natural resources in cooperation with individuals and organizations to improve the quality of life in Iowa and ensure a legacy for future generations” (“About DNR”). We are entrusted by the government and the people to protect Iowa’s natural resources, including
Bloody Run Creek. With the knowledge we have regarding the damage Supreme Beef’s feedlot would cause to the local water system, approving the construction of the feedlot would go directly against the values the IDNR holds. Because of the prior problems seen within this business, including its violations, it would be difficult to trust Supreme Beef with protecting our environment in the long run. Due to this project’s high risk of animal and food waste sinking into the karst topography and getting into the water supply, it would be reckless for an organization committed to protecting Iowa’s natural resources to make a choice that would adversely impact the Bloody Run Creek.

Bloody Run Creek is also designated as an Outstanding Iowa Water, meaning it receives Tier 2 ½ protections from the IDNR. These protections “...prohibit any lowering of water quality in unique waters as identified in the water quality standards unless the lowering is temporary and limited, results from expansion of existing sources, or serves to maintain or enhance the value, quality, or use of the OIW, as determined by the Director of IDNR on a case-by-case basis.” (“Outstanding Iowa Waters”). Allowing the cattle feedlot to lower Bloody Run Creek’s water quality would fall directly in violation with the Tier 2 ½ protections, as it would not be temporary, not expand existing water sources, nor enhance the Bloody Run Creek in any way. Although we have the power to make exceptions to these protections, doing so would send a message to Iowans that the IDNR is willing to bend the rules they’ve established in favor of corporate farming interests, especially if our waterways are damaged by the feedlot.

Of course, it is important to consider the negative impacts of this decision. Denying Supreme Beef permission to build the cattle feedlot would also be denying an influx of jobs coming into Northeast Iowa, which in turn would help boost the local economy during a time as tumultuous as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the potential to decrease the water quality
that so many locals rely on and enjoy could lead to an influx of citizens moving out of the region, weakening the local economy as well. There is also the potential that this corporate cattle feedlot would drive business away from local farmers, hurting our local economy even further.

Taking all of this into account, it is clear that the feedlot will do more harm than good for the majority of stakeholders in the situation. We as the IDNR have to recognize the damage that could be caused to one of our Outstanding Iowa Waters and prevent Supreme Beef from building on this land. The message the IDNR sends should be clear: we do not support business projects that extensively harm our natural resources, and will not side with business interests over protecting the environment. Allowing Supreme Beef to build this feedlot and pollute the Bloody Run Creek would go against our values as an organization and undermine our integrity to protect Iowa’s natural resources. Therefore, we should not issue a permit to Supreme Beef, LLC for the construction of their cattle feedlot.
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