The Iowa Department of Natural Resources will have the final say in whether Walz Energy’s Supreme Beef, LLC should be allowed to open and operate its cattle feedlot of 11,000 heads along with its earthen manure lagoon in Clayton County, Iowa. As a department with primary values in protecting the environment and conserving and maintaining wildlife, land, and water resources in the state of Iowa, the ethical issues of this decision must be meticulously analyzed to form a decision. By applying two of Harvard professor Joseph Badaracco's frameworks for ethical decision making to the facts and implications of this case, I have concluded that Supreme Beef, LLC should be prohibited from further construction and/or future operation of their cattle feedlot due to the project’s detrimental effects on the environment, Iowa citizens’ wellbeing, and integrity of the DNR. This decision sets precedent for similar developments in cherished and protected environments like that of nearby Bloody Run Creek, an Outstanding Iowa Water. Therefore, we must make the decision that enforces the values we stand for, promotes rectitude in future considerations, and increases opportunities for wellbeing through vigilant environmental responsibility and preservation.

According to Badaracco, an organization’s choice between right and right expresses its priorities and sets a precedent for how similar future situations will be handled. Utilizing Badaracco’s first framework for making ethical decisions, the Net/Net framework, I developed my decision intending to promote the greatest wellbeing for the greatest amount of people. Specifically, we must make the decision that protects and promotes Iowa citizens’ rights to health and happiness. Monona is a city in Clayton County, Iowa which values the protection and maintenance of nearby high-quality water resource Bloody Run Creek, one of 34 assigned Outstanding Iowa Waters in the state. Many anglers enjoy fishing for trout in the creek, tourists and locals alike take advantage of its water for swimming and kayaking, and small businesses
provide campers drinking water and amenities to enhance the northeast Iowa experience. Paul Rasmussen’s Spook Cave & Campground, nestled along Bloody Run Creek and 5 miles northeast of the Walz Energy project, is one of many examples of the impact on wellbeing our decision will have. With 15,000 people a year floating through Spook Cave, it’s no question that the quality of the water that people are drinking, playing in, and running their businesses around plays a crucial role in determining whether the city finds success and wellbeing (Eller, 2017).

The terrain of northeast Iowa is one riddled with sinkholes and underground caves due to fractured rocks that also provide manure and other pollutants a direct pathway to both surface and groundwater. The earthen 39-million-gallon lagoon permitted to the Walzes through the state wastewater division violates animal feeding operation rules and poses serious threats to the health of the surrounding environment. Walz Energy owners and contractors violated common practices that would keep stormwater from running into the Bloody Run Creek, which led to pollution of the creek and damage to the habitat vital to trout reproduction (Walz Energy, 2019).

When Walz Energy proposed their plan of operation in 2017, it included a methane digester that would convert cattle manure and food waste into natural gas (Jordan, 2020). If this were the case today, my decision may be different because of the economic and environmental benefits of digesters such as generating renewable energy to power vehicles and creating short- and long-term jobs. The new nutrient management plan contains no mention of digesters, however, and instead suggests applying the manure to farm fields. The plan also shows that the Walzes would administer more manure than advised by Iowa State University, which could devastate nearby waterways with excess nitrate runoff (Jordan 2020). After the state has spent $1.4 million in helping restore Bloody Run Creek’s health since 2005, it would not promote the greatest wellbeing for the greatest amount of people to risk the quality of the water source for the
sake of allowing Supreme Beef, LLC to open and operate its cattle feedlot and massive earthen manure lagoon in such a karst area (Eller, 2017). Supreme Beef, LLC operating here would, in fact, jeopardize the health of Iowa’s people and animals. Badarraco quoted John Stuart Mill in saying, “Things that give beauty, dignity, and value to life are what constitutes happiness” (Badarraco, 2002). Experiencing such things requires a level of good health, and for the people who reside nearby and visit Clayton County, high-quality resource water is at the foundation of wellbeing. Thus, the promotion of greatest wellbeing to the greatest amount of people means strictly and consistently protecting the environment by shutting down Supreme Beef, LLC operations.

The second of Badaracco's frameworks I utilized in making my decision focuses on the character of the decisionmaker. As stated previously, our decision sets the precedent for similar developments in protected environments. Careful consideration of what messages we want to send about what we as a department value and prioritize led me to finalize my decision. As the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, we must make decisions that advocate for the preservation of the environment, health and safety of wildlife, and cleanliness of watersheds so that people know we value and prioritize such things over lining pockets. It is also important that we send the message that we are a department that cares about the wellbeing of individuals. If the Department were to jeopardize our integrity in the eyes of the citizens, our mission to work in cooperation with citizens to improve the quality of life in Iowa would be entirely negated (About DNR). Although the project has the potential to create jobs as well as demand for Eastern Iowa commodities, it would be at the expense of the health and happiness of anyone living nearby or visiting the area. Because of the possibility that our decision on this issue will guide future
decisionmakers on similar issues, the message it will send should be one that prioritizes Iowa’s environment and individuals to ensure those values are carried into the future.

By prohibiting Supreme Beef, LLC operations from opening in the proposed location, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources makes clear our priorities and promotes the greatest wellbeing for the greatest amount of people. The residents and tourists of Bloody Run Creek, Spook Cave & Campground, and the like will benefit from this decision in that they will not have the constant worry of a biogas leak/explosion, they will be able to swim in and drink the natural water without getting sick and will have plenty of trout to fish for. Owners of campgrounds or tourist attractions will be confident in the quality of their business’s water, and the animals living in the region can thrive in health. The DNR can assure the State of Iowa that their concerns and values are imperative, and that we do not stand for monetary gain at the expense of happiness and health.

Unfortunately, there are also downfalls to this decision. Both the thousands of short- and long-term jobs that would have been produced by the operation of this project would no longer be prospective. The opportunity, if Supreme Beef would have ever risen to it, to convert manure and food waste into natural gas will be forfeited indefinitely which in turn negates any positive environmental potential of the project. Those residents in favor of the project for economic development reasons will not be happy with the decision, nor will the owners, employees, or associates of Supreme Beef, LLC. A few possible alternative solutions to this issue would be to allow Supreme Beef, LLC to open and operate its cattle feedlot if they install an anaerobic digester to convert manure and food waste into natural gas, allow them to open if they move to a different part of the state with more stable terrain, allow them to open if they move to a region without high-quality resources, or to allow them to open for a trial-run of sorts to determine
whether or not they can and will comply with rules and regulations. Finally, an alternative could be to allow them to open only if they meet all criteria above so that we wouldn’t lose the economic benefits of the project while still maintaining priority in environmental conservation.

In conclusion, I advise the Iowa Department of Natural Resources to prohibit Supreme Beef, LLC from opening its 10,000-cattle feedlot operation as the most ethical solution to this complex issue. After carefully considering what will promote the greatest wellbeing for the greatest amount of people as well affirm the Department’s top priorities to the State of Iowa, I have found that the preservation and maintenance of local water sources is vital in doing so. The great amount of vitality and dignity these bodies of water provide outweighs the potential economic development qualities the project may have.
Works Cited


