

CAMPAIGNERS' WARNINGS OVER ANIMAL WELFARE

Rise OF THE megafarm

Number soars from 800 to at least 1,100 in only five years

EXCLUSIVE
 BY **NADA FARHOUD**
 Environment Editor



THE number of US-style megafarms in the UK has rocketed to at least 1,100 - up from 800 five years ago.

Critics have called it a "cruel and unnecessary" trend. Some of the massive locations hold over a million animals.

Campaigners say the businesses are turning the countryside into intensive factory farms and causing pollution.

Aerial photos taken by the Mirror show cows packed into US-style feedlots where they are fattened before slaughter.

At chicken farms we photographed, the smell of ammonia coming from stark industrial-sized sheds clogs the back of the throat, even from a distance.

Philip Lymbery, Compassion in World Farming's global chief executive, said cattle, chickens and pigs at the US-style megafarms are reared in vast numbers "in conditions of utter deprivation".

He added: "Cattle standing in barren, crowded pens, not a blade of grass in sight. Tens of thousands of chickens in crowded barns, forced to grow so fast they often suffer painful, crippling, cramped conditions. They'll have more room in the oven.

"Those producing eggs are likely to spend their whole life in cages so small they will never get to flap their wings

properly.

By US definition, a megafarm holds more than 125,000 birds reared for meat, 82,000 egg-laying hens, 2,500 pigs, 700 dairy cows or 1,000 beef cattle.

British organisations say they do not recognise these terms as they relate to different production systems.

But the number of UK farms that meet that definition is now 1,099, Compassion in World Farming has found. The true figure is expected to be higher due to figures for Scotland being unavailable.

There are 19 UK dairy farms that meet the threshold - the animals there are

mainly kept in sheds.

Four poultry farms have licences for over a million birds.

The majority of UK farmed animals are kept in intensive units.

But the National Pig Association said: "Larger scale farms are often able to provide more resources, more stockpeople and a dedicated vet that facilitates good animal welfare. It's the standard of husbandry provided by stockpeople that dictates animal welfare, not the scale of farm."

It said 95% of pigs are produced to Red Tractor standards and about 30% to RSPCA Assured standards, adding: "Pig vets visit and inspect farms every three months as a minimum and an annual audit is conducted.

"The pig sector is one of the most regulated with regards to environ-

mental impact." But Abigail Penny, of Animal Equality UK, said: "Most Brits would be ashamed... that these monstrous farms are in the UK. The industry is relentless in its pursuit of more money. It is out of control."

Many small farmers have been forced out of business by factors such as competition from larger players. There are also concerns intensive

BIG BUSINESS Trade in poultry farms are causing pollution. The River Wye, straddling the England/Wales border, is suffering from intensive poultry production. Manure from the birds is spread on the land as fertiliser at such high levels it is washed into tributaries when it rains.

British Poultry Council chief executive Richard Griffiths said: "We are seeing a shift towards fewer but bigger, more productive and lower-

impact farms because large scale farming is about improving efficiency and productivity to meet demand.

"If we can make production more efficient to support our welfare priorities, reduce inputs and impacts while maintaining our responsibility to put safe, affordable... food on every table, then we will move in that direction."

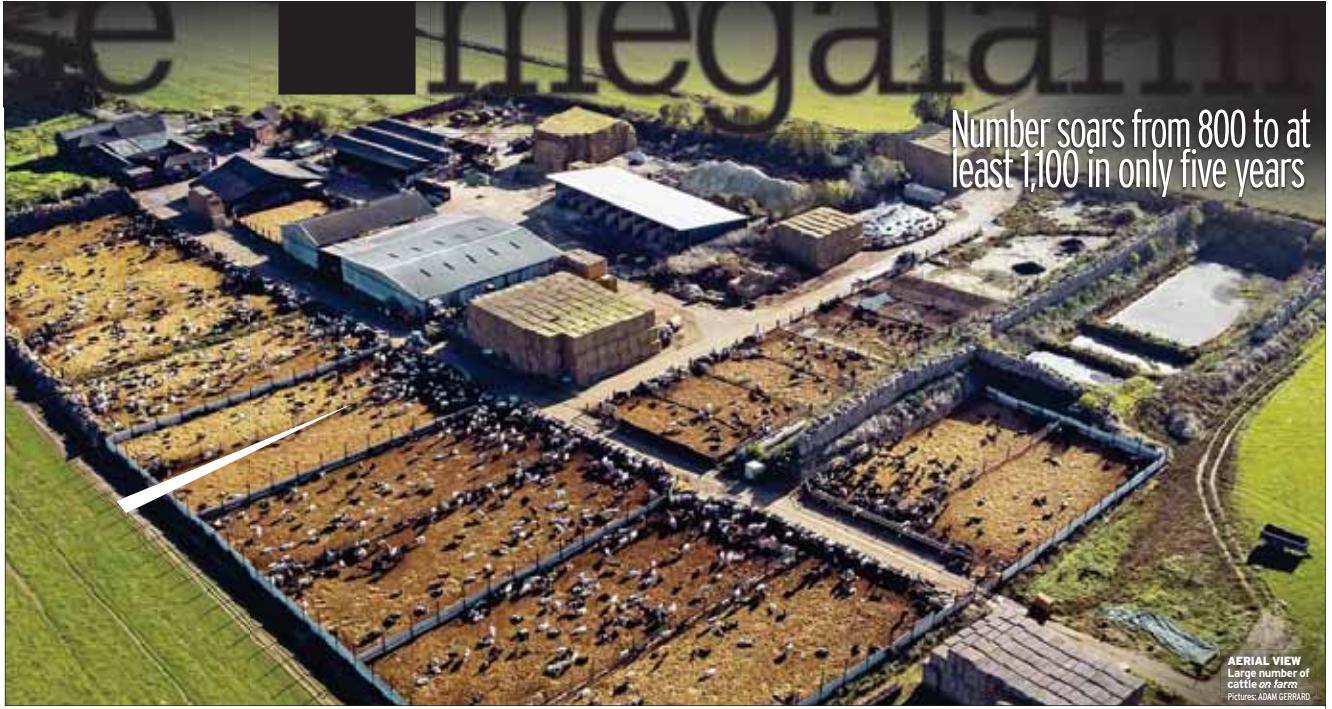
He said rearing poultry indoors is "the most efficient way to feed the nation while ensuring the sustaina-

bility of our food system". The National Farmers' Union said: "British farmers have some of the highest standards in the world. Animal health and welfare is always a farmer's top priority... regardless of the size of the farm.

"UK farmers also adhere to... stringent environmental rules." The National Beef Association did not respond to our request for comment.

nada.farhoud@mirror.co.uk

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UNITS Where chickens are housed