

Um, exploding *what*?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

February 15, 2012

[Something foul is brewing](#) in the small-town Midwest, where I grew up:

A few years ago, hog farmers throughout the Midwest noticed foam building on top of their manure pits. Soon after, barns began exploding, killing thousands of hogs while farmers lost millions of dollars.

Wow, okay, so explosive pig-manure foam is a thing. The article continues:

A team of University of Minnesota researchers is looking to find a fix.

You think? Yeah, someone might want to fix this. And there's more:

Not only does the foam cause explosions but it also reduces manure storage volume and dirties the hogs.

To be fair, I hear hogs don't mind getting a little dirty. Though last I checked they do mind exploding in a fireball of their own waste. What can be done?

Larry Jacobson, another professor in the department, and his team haven't found a solution for the foam but have discovered ways to curb its growth.

"We're treating the symptoms but not getting to the cause," he said.

Well, sort of. It's the specific, immediate cause of the explodo-foam that Jacobson and his team are after, and I certainly hope they find it. But it's worth pointing out the more basic problem here: massive pits of pig manure are toxic waste dumps, not an essential part of agriculture. They're a byproduct of not pig farming itself so much as the industrial push to raise large numbers of animals in a small space. This is not necessary in any meaningful sense of the word.

Manure, of course, is useful as fertilizer. (I don't imagine I'm the only one who learned this as a kid--it was probably explained to me the first time I commented on my home state's [dairy air](#)--and simply assumed that this was actually what all farmers did with the stuff.) But a limited amount of it can be put to use in this way in any one place, and then only if you're also growing plants of some kind.

So, lakes of pig manure dot the landscape of my home region, causing much stinky air and, it turns out, the occasional exploding barn. You don't have to be an anti-business radical, a vegetarian or a fancy-pants-bacon-buying foodie to think that's just a little bit insane.

(Via [Tom Philpott](#).)