

Case Study 10 – Conflict of Interest
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Case Summary

The Environmental Quality Board has commissioned the University of Minnesota to conduct a two year study examining the environmental impact of livestock operations. In preparation for this study a citizen's advisory board has been meeting for the past year to develop guidelines for assessing the impact. Recently one of the groups participating in this board, Clean Water Alliance of Minnesota, has resigned. They feel that the University's results will be biased in favor of expanding livestock operations because of the financial links between the University and various agribusiness groups.

Conflicts & Related Policy Issues

The conflict of interest in this case exists because the University's past, and possibly future, research has been funded by agribusiness groups interested in expanding livestock operations. Therefore the University stands to gain financially if the results of the environmental impact study support such expansion. This presents both a scientific and academic conflicts of interest. The scientific conflict of interest arises because the University's researchers are being asked to deliver "scientific testimony as an expert witness" regarding the impact of livestock expansion. The academic conflict of interest could arise for individual researchers if they used the University's research to profit by gaining more grants from agribusiness.

The conflict in this case, whether real or perceived, falls under the University's conflict of interest policy because it involves both the involvement of private sector concerns (the various agribusiness groups) and outreach to the community (the research itself). This policy requires the disclosure of any potential conflicts and that such potential conflict undergo an internal review by relevant administrators and committees. In this case it may be necessary for the either the Environmental Quality Board and/or the citizen's advisory board to review appointments to the project as well. Some other suggestions for possible resolutions are given below.

Possible Remedies

Several possible remedies exist. First and foremost the University should attempt to assign researchers that do not have ties with agribusiness to the project. If this is not possible, then disclosure of the researchers' previous funding would be necessary. It would also be good for the advisory board to have oversight into the design, implementation, and analysis of the project. For this reason, we feel that Clean Water Alliance's withdrawing from the board is both premature and counter-productive. Such oversight would serve to keep the researchers honest about their work, reassure the board that the research was being carried out in a scientifically valid manner, and educate the community's representatives about the process. Finally, if the board and the University could not come to terms regarding Clean Water Alliance's concerns another party might need to carry out the research. Who this other party might be is unclear – they would need the resources to properly design and conduct the study without any ties to agribusiness, something both the University and local government both have. Alternatively, if sufficient funding for the research were available through the Environmental Quality Board, two parallel studies by two different groups of researchers could be conducted and compared.