

Role of key actors for an effective license instrument in Argentine agro

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ABSTRACT

In Argentina, a significant discrepancy has been detected between the formal requirements for the submission of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) in operating feedlots and the actual purpose of the EIA as a predictive tool for environmental management. This lack of coherence between the requirements demanded by the authorities and the practical feasibility of obtaining an Environmental License has been a persistent challenge in our country. To address this problem effectively, we have chosen to involve key actors in the process: feedlot farmers and environmental authorities who have the responsibility of approving and supervising the environmental requirements. We carried out semi-structured interviews with these actors and field inspections to evaluate environmental management in feedlots of various scales, located in the provinces of Buenos Aires, Córdoba and Santa Fe. From the valuable data collected, we have developed a comprehensive guide specifically designed to facilitate obtaining environmental licenses for operating facilities. This guide has been discussed in a participatory workshop with the same actors involved to achieve a superior product. Its effective implementation promises a number of significant benefits, including the prevention of environmental conflicts, the granting of permanent locations for these activities, the simplification of the administrative process for farmers, the reduction of costs in both public and private sectors, and the provision of an updated registry of farmers for more effective monitoring and control by authorities.

INTRODUCTION

In Argentina, agricultural activities are fundamental pillars of the economy. However, together with mining activity, they produce the greatest negative impacts on the environment. The areas of deterioration and degradation of the country's environment comprise 75% of the national territory and have been affected, among others, by livestock farming, with the consequent impoverishment of living conditions (Subsecretaría de Planificación Territorial y de la Inversión Pública, 2015).

Regarding animal production, a total of 1,149 free-range fattening establishments (feedlots) are registered in the country, of which 71.6% are located in three provinces: Buenos Aires, Córdoba and Santa Fe (SENASA, 2021).

Argentina has experienced significant growth in feedlots in recent decades (SENASA). Although many feedlots manage their environmental aspects adequately and seek to comply with regulations, there is a lack of clarity in the farmers for obtaining an environmental license. This situation makes environmental compliance difficult for farmers who actively work on the sustainable management of their operations. This work was carried out to address this problem in three key provinces of Argentina: Buenos Aires, Córdoba and Santa Fe. The objective is to provide clear and effective guidance that facilitates environmental compliance and promotes more sustainable practices in feedlots industry.

Regarding environmental legislation, the agricultural production sector is covered by regulatory frameworks at different jurisdictional levels. In Argentina, Law N°25675 (General Environmental Law) establishes the minimum requirements for adequate environmental management (MAyDS, 2020). The environmental policy and management instrument provided by this law is the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). Being a federal country, the provinces can improve or expand the aspects established in national regulations, but never fail to comply with them.

However, Argentina does not have a national Environmental Impact Assessment Law. Therefore, it requires standardizing regulations between provinces and establishing minimum budgets.

The Environmental Impact Assessment is a tool that allows predicting impacts by preventing their occurrence. Considering what has been said, the requirements should be different for projects and operating activities.

In the case of feedlots, a high number are in operation, therefore, to obtain environmental licenses, different requirements than those requested for an EIA should be considered, given that the Environmental Impact Assessment is a predictive tool.

In addition to this, we must point out the existence of deficiencies in the application of Environmental Impact Assessment, having indicated by Yang (2018), five as a priority: 1) procedural aspects, 2) possible alteration in the objectives to be met by the EIA, 3) deficient incorporation of technical aspects to the EIA, 4) accessibility to information by interested parties, 5) dependence on effectiveness in the implementation of the standard, among others.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The work was based on analyzing this type of situations for free-range fattening activities in the provinces of Buenos Aires, Santa Fe and Córdoba in order to recognize shortcomings from both a regulatory and administrative point of view and recommend solutions. Existing documentation was reviewed, establishments of different scales were visited in the field where measurements of environmental factors were carried out and interviews were held with key actors (municipalities, provincial authorities, and representatives of the private sector). This multidimensional approach was essential to identify the problems associated with obtaining environmental licenses for feedlots.

With the results obtained, a protocol was developed as a guide for obtaining environmental licenses, and through a participatory workshop with key actors, recommendations and improvements were incorporated into the proposed instrument. The results of this research aim to contribute to the improvement of the environmental performance of this activity and facilitate administrative procedures for provincial authorities and farmers.

RESULTS

Analysis of the regulatory framework

The analysis of the regulatory framework at national and provincial level for this activity is presented in the following table:

RULE	REGULATION LEVEL	CÓRDOBA	BUENOS AIRES	SANTA FE
SENASA RESOLUTIONN°329/17*	National	Applicable	Applicable	Applicable
INTENSIVE PRODUCTION LAWS AND DECREES	Provincial	Law 9306 y Resol 29/17	Law N°14867	LawN°11717 y Decree N°101/03
ENVIRONMENT QUALITY STANDARDS	Provincial	Yes, for intensive production systems	Not specified	Not specified
HAZARDOUS WASTE	Provincial	Law N°8973/03 y Regulatory Decree 2149/03	Not specified	Decree N°1844/02

ANIMAL CEMETERY MANAGEMENT	Provincial	Not specified	Not specified	RESOLUTION N°284/21
PATHOLOGICAL WASTE	Mixed (National/Prov.)	Specific intensive animal production	National. Not specific for Feedlots.	RESOLUTION N°69/98 y Decree N°388/00

*Resolution 329/17 (SENASA): It establishes the requirements for facilities, biosafety, hygiene, and sanitary management, for the registration and sanitary authorization of free-range fattening establishments that contain cattle, buffaloes, goats and sheep, without access to grazing.

Field visits and interviews with farmers

Field visits to 10 free-range fattening establishments of different scales surveyed yielded the following findings:

In the province of Buenos Aires, the state of the facilities surveyed shows non-compliance with Resolution No. 329/17, lacking shade, inadequate drainage, and uncompacted subsoil. Several non-compliance with regulations were observed, although some establishments show a willingness to adapt. Regarding environmental management, the treatment of corpses is generally inadequate, the effluents are mostly not treated, and there is inadequate management of pathological and dangerous waste except in one feedlot where environmental management is adequate.

In the province of Córdoba, the state of the facilities surveyed is variable, some are deficient and need significant repairs, and others are in good condition. Compliance with SENASA Resolution No. 329/17 is variable. In environmental management, everything from inadequate practices for the treatment of corpses to compost in a distant dairy farm were observed; inadequate effluent disposal; difficulties in waste management varying in effectiveness, and problems in the management of pathological and hazardous waste.

In the province of Santa Fe, the condition of the facilities surveyed is generally good with variability in the construction material. SENASA Resolution No. 329/17 is satisfactorily implemented. In environmental management, the use of composting piles for the treatment of corpses was observed in some cases; maintenance problems were identified in lagoons and canals with pumping in effluent management; variability in waste management, some with difficulties regarding waste treatment, and others with verified treatment of pathological and dangerous waste by an authorized operator.

These results show a variety of challenges and progress in key areas of environmental management and regulatory compliance in the establishments visited in the three provinces.

Interviews with Government Actors

Interviews were conducted with government officials at the provincial level to understand limitations in the application of regulations and seek solutions. Some of the highlights from the interviews are detailed below:

In Buenos Aires, the process to obtain environmental authorization for feedlots begins in the municipality. It is essential to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment. The enforcement authority in this phase is the Ministry of Environment. In addition to the EIA, it is necessary for the establishment to have authorizations linked to water resources from the Water Authority (AdA). A notable challenge in Buenos Aires is the delay in the process by AdA. Currently, there is a collaborative effort to regulate the feedlot law, including various authorities associated with livestock production. A no less important point is the need to differentiate the standard activities in operation from those that are in project state since the former would not comply with the requirement to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment.

In Santa Fe province, the Ministry of Environment oversees the environmental licensing process. New projects require an EIA, while existing operations must submit Environmental Compliance Reports. Various regulations apply, and presentation requirements vary depending on the number of animals. Nevertheless, environmental requirements are not specific for feedlots as they are intended for factory activities. It involves the farmers in a difficult process trying to adequate the real situations in the feedlot to the factory fixed parameters as if they were a cookies, plastic, or car factory. Plus, in some parts or parameters in the Environmental Compliance Reports the farmers must complete with intentional mistakes to complete all the fields, i.e. the feedlot throwing its effluents to a river or land after treatment, is the only option in the Report. Due to the problems mentioned above, in many cases, farmers cannot get environmental licenses from environmental authorities while SENASA grants operating permits if they accomplish Resolution 329/17. Santa Fe authorities highlight the importance of collaboration with SENASA and the municipality to manage exceptions and adjustments in rural areas.

In Córdoba, obtaining an environmental license implies complying with the Resolutions and Provisions of the Ministry of Environment of the province. Farmers must obtain approval from the Provincial Water Resources Administration for water extraction and waste treatment. The entire process can be lengthy and especially challenging for small farmers.

Development of a model protocol

Based on the results of the interviews and the identification of the mentioned problems, a model protocol was developed with the aim of constituting a clear and concise tool so that provincial authorities can receive standardized information from farmers on environmental management of feedlots

This protocol includes general information about the establishment, description of pens, and information on water use, runoff management, manure management, management of dead animals, control of vectors of health interest, waste generation and environmental management plan.

Participatory workshop

The work team carried out a participatory workshop at the Center for Higher Studies of Rivadavia, province of Buenos Aires, on October 11, 2023. This event brought together municipal environmental authorities, environmental specialists, the coordinator of the Feedlot Environmental Management Group (GAF) organization, students, farmers, and staff of feedlot companies.

The objectives of the workshop were to establish a validation space for the field tasks developed, to provide training on environmental and regulatory matters, to know the problems in governance and to validate and receive contributions for the environmental license instrument prepared by the work team.

The workshop allowed collaborative exchange and improvement proposals were obtained for the proposed instrument. In addition, the foundations were established for future exchanges and collaborations that will contribute to addressing environmental challenges in feedlot production in Argentina.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a discrepancy between provincial regulations and the practical challenges farmers face. Interviews with authorities suggest that regulatory adaptations and clarifications are being worked on, which is an essential step to facilitate understanding and compliance by farmers.

Differences in the implementation of environmental regulations between provinces indicate the need for a more standardized approach. This would allow farmers to have consistent expectations regardless of their geographic location.

The costs associated with complying with environmental regulations appear to be particularly challenging for smaller farmers. This suggests that financial support mechanisms or incentive systems could be sought to promote sustainable practices.

Results from the participatory workshop emphasize the need to improve communication between municipal and provincial levels and farmers. There is a call to bring practical proposals to legislators, which implies that the legislative process should more closely consider the operational reality of feedlots.

The workshop also highlighted the importance of training in environmental and regulatory matters. The suggestion is that the development of educational programs could be a valuable tool to improve environmental management in feedlots.

The variability in waste management, effluent, and corpse management among the feedlots visited indicates that there is room for broader adoption of good practices. Standardization of these practices could help better compliance with the proposed model protocol.

The lack of a participatory instance in the previous phase of regulation is a point highlighted by authorities and farmers, suggesting that greater inclusion in the decision-making process could result in more realistic and applicable regulations.

The responses obtained during the workshop are essential for the adjustment and improvement of the model protocol and demonstrate the effectiveness of including multiple stakeholders in the policy development process.

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