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Smithfield Foods and the Future of Meat: Unravelling Environmental Injustice

In her first month as public affairs director at Smithfield Foods, Maxie Leeⁱ realized she had stepped into the most challenging role of her career. Lee had joined Smithfield in 2021, reporting to the chief administrative officer (CAO), who led the company's "administrative operations, including corporate communications, external affairs, government affairs, human resources, investor relations, legal and sustainability functions."¹ Lee was a key member of the CAO's strategic team that was responsible for protecting the company's reputation and brand, as well as creating internal strategic alignment among its more than 50,000 global employees.² One of Lee's responsibilities included forging strong and lasting relationships with the company's many stakeholders.

Even though Lee had only been with Smithfield for a month, her boss had asked that she present a five-year strategic public affairs plan to the executive team within three weeks.

Lee reflected on Smithfield's years of litigation settlements that resolved 26 lawsuits filed by more than 500 residents in eastern North Carolina.³ The lawsuits focused on nuisance claims, attributed to living near hog farms run by Smithfield contractors.

A nuisance is generally defined as a use of property or an activity that unreasonably limits or diminishes a person's health, safety, or enjoyment of life; or that interferes with the other person's quiet enjoyment or beneficial use of his or her own property.⁴

Almost simultaneously with settling the nuisance lawsuits, Smithfield entered into an agreement with Dominion Energy, pledging \$500 million through 2028 to develop an industrial-scale biogas project in North Carolina. After decades of research and development into alternative technologies to properly manage and dispose of hog waste, this agreement was Smithfield's solution. It allowed the company to capture the methane gas caused from waste lagoons, convert it into biogas, and sell it to the natural gas market.⁵

ⁱ Maxie Lee is a fictional character.

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