

Chapter 10 Coexisting with Neighbors

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The farming environment in which we live is continually changing. Several factors stand out as influences of that change in this day and age: the geographic consolidation of agricultural industries is creating a concentration of agricultural wastes, national public awareness of the environment and pollution has heightened, urban growth is spilling over into our nation's farmland, and few people understand typical farming practices. All too often people feel that lawsuits are the only way to settle these conflicts. Each of these conditions has an influence on the relationship between old farmers, new farmers and their non-farm neighbors alike.

All livestock operations have to deal with neighbor-related issues on a regular basis. As the urban community continues to expand into the rural landscape, conflicts between farm and non-farm neighbors will increase. Many urbanites that move to the country to get away from urban pressures are not accustomed to, nor even understanding of, farming practices and "country living" conditions. They have a disconnect as to where their food comes from and what it takes to get it to their plates. This lack of knowledge has caused the general public to expect pristine environments and aseptic conditions even within production agriculture systems. The presence of dust, odors and insect pests that are normal occurrences with farming operations are not on the radar screen of many urbanites who move to a more rural setting seeking "pastoral" living conditions.

Problems between neighbors can and do arise as the boundaries between rural and urban life blur. A number of issues can cause contention between neighbors, often the result of differing viewpoints. From the farmer's point of view, increases in road traffic and trash, trespass from pets and people, and constraints about normal farming practices may become an issue. For non-farm neighbors, dust and odors, insect pests, noise and obstructed views may become sources of irritation. Some common complaints of non-farm neighbors include:

- Odors that make them physically ill, forcing them to stay inside with closed windows.
- Not being able to invite friends over because of odors and insect pests.

While these problems typically surface where human population is more concentrated, they can arise even in the most rural of counties. Neighbors with a farm background or living on a farm themselves can have the same perception of nuisance toward other farms as those who are new to rural living. They are familiar with agricultural conditions on their own farm or surrounding area, may recognize more readily the source of a particular nuisance, and be less tolerant of situations they believe could be improved.

At times neighbor relations become strained as disagreement over issues heats up. Litigation is too often seen as the means for relief from these conflicts. Litigation, however, rarely results in a true winner because the outcome is often financial cost, physical stress and

broken relationships. Whatever the issue may be, preventing problems before they cause a contentious situation is the most effective way to minimize neighbor conflicts. The old adage “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” certainly applies to the arena of neighbor relations.

Conflict prevention measures can be both tangible and intangible in nature. Communication skills and disseminating information may be as important as minimizing odors or pests through improved management practices. The following are practices and suggestions that can help farmers maintain or improve neighbor relations. Proper manure handling practices are foremost points to consider in avoiding potential nuisance complaints or court action.

- **Get to know your neighbors.** This is perhaps the most important and simplest action you can take. People are more open to discussion with individuals they know. Be neighborly and a good listener. As a result, your neighbors will be more likely to come to you with a complaint instead of reporting you to an authority or enforcement agency. A lack of good will between neighbors is a contributing factor in most nuisance complaints.
- **Operate your farm as if you were the next-door neighbor.** Try understanding their viewpoint as non-farm neighbors living in a farming community. Recognize that neighbors have the right to enjoy their property without the nuisance of flies, odor and dust. Properly maintained and operated livestock and poultry farms do not need to be, and should not be, a nuisance to neighbors.
- **Small things matter in maintaining good relationships, such as a wave and a smile.** Be particularly mindful of sensitive neighbors. Little gestures of friendliness go a long way toward fortifying goodwill. Reward tolerant neighbors with a token of your appreciation — perhaps free poultry litter for their gardens, a neighborhood barbeque, a holiday turkey or something similar.
- **Invite neighbors over the fence.** “Show and tell” your farming operation, explaining the need for some practices that perhaps are unappealing or objectionable. The general public has no idea of what it takes to put food on their tables.
- **Screen some things from public view.** Since people often “smell” with their eyes, screen from public view production, manure storage and composting facilities with the use of tree lines or shelterbelts. Minimizing visibility helps reduce the suggestion that the farm might be a source of odor, flies or other nuisances.
- **Cover manure that is transported on public roadways to prevent spillage and blow out.** Not only is it a sensible practice toward maintaining good neighbor relations, but most states by law require that any material that can blow out during transport, such as poultry litter, must be covered and contained.
- **Cover stored manure** in accordance with best management practices for nutrient retention and water quality protection. A stack house structure common for storing poultry litter, however covering stacked manure with a tarp, keeping it away from roadways, waterways and property lines is advisable and sufficient. Uncovered stacked manure can be a potential water quality problem.
- **Be considerate when land applying manure.** Consider the prevailing winds and weather conditions when spreading manure near neighbors. Allow a little flexibility

in your spreading schedule to accommodate unfavorable spreading conditions. Windy or wet conditions can displace nutrients from where they were intended, causing poor fertilization uniformity and potential contamination problems on adjacent properties. Incorporate manure into the soil wherever and whenever possible to maximize the fertilization benefits from the available nutrients and to minimize odor dispersion and potential nutrient runoff due to storm water.

- **Land apply manure in the morning hours to allow for greater odor dissipation and manure drying throughout the day.** Applying manure in the late afternoon and evening hours allows the still night air to trap and spread odors close to the ground, a common complaint of livestock and poultry farm neighbors.
- **Inform neighbors when you intend to spread manure.** Be willing to be flexible with your spreading schedule to avoid disrupting special occasions such as a backyard wedding, family reunion, etc. Maintain no-spread buffer zones at the property line and avoid spreading on weekends or holidays when neighbors are more likely to be out-of-doors.
- **Keep manure, feed and other organic material around facilities as dry as possible.** Wet materials generate more odors and flies than do those that are kept dry. Clean up spilled feed and manure around the facilities and roadways to prevent an increase of flies, rodents, and odors.
- **Make your farm appealing.** The appearance of the farm plays an important part in what others in the community think of you and your farming operation. Eyesores create less goodwill and public sympathy if problems arise. Farm appearance can easily be construed as a reflection of a farmer's professionalism, competence and concern for neighborhood conditions.
- **Maintain property line fences.** Sage advice continues to hold true that "good fences make for good neighbors."
- **Develop manure and odor control management plans.** Make sure all employees understand the importance of appropriate manure handling and odor control. Use manure management practices that reduce the release of offensive odors such as composting or transfer of excess manure off the farm. Maintain records of manure application rates and timing as evidence of adhering to appropriate Best Management Practices for manure use.
- **Communicate plans for new construction or expansion with neighbors.** Show how you have taken their concerns about manure management and odor control into consideration. At times this may go further than just being neighborly; it may actually be a requirement where county ordinances stipulate the need for a public hearing or comment period prior to construction or expansion.
- **Give prompt and genuine responses to complaints or problems when they arise.** Be sympathetic and understanding of neighbors' concerns and avoid being uncaring or arrogant. Sometimes it is better to bite your tongue to do what is best for your farm over the long term. Ignoring issues, whether you feel they are relevant or not, can quickly drive a neighbor to seek legal action. Maintaining open lines of communication will always help resolve issues when they arise. Inform your poultry company of any potential nuisance situations with a neighbor and seek their advice on the issue. Solving the problem may be as simple as making a management change.

- **Consider new alternatives and technologies for manure handling and odor control.** A small investment now may prevent large legal expenses later on.
- **Comply with applicable federal, state and local environmental regulations.** Don't give neighbors legal reason to investigate or sue over environmental infractions.
- **Conduct an environmental self assessment** similar to the University of Georgia Farm*A*Syst program, or have a third party help you identify environmental concerns before they become a nuisance or legal problem.
- **Be active in the community.** Better educate the public by supporting agricultural education activities and outreach programs. Be active with the local government, promoting pro-agriculture public opinion, legislation and regulation. Get to know your local representatives and community decision makers and keep them informed about your business.

While applying these steps may not prevent someone from taking legal action against your farming operation, they can encourage taking reasonable precautions, help control how the farm operates, and assist with neighbor relationships and fostering of good report within the community. Then, should problems arise, your reputation as a conscientious neighbor will enhance the resolution of conflicts.

Developing and improving neighbor relations can be one of the most important activities that help farming operations survive in our changing rural environment. By helping neighbors understand the activities associated with agriculture, farmers may help shape how they feel about agricultural practices and avert needless conflicts and animosity. Treating neighbors with concern and respect will help ensure continuation of appropriate, responsible farming practices in the future.

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