



Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Getting along with nonfarm neighbors

Farmers are doing some truly innovative things to try to get along with their nonfarm neighbors. As more and more city folk seek the good life in rural America, farmers have been forced to make adjustments.

Some have tried standing their ground, literally, by saying, "We were here first and we intend to farm the way we always farmed." To their chagrin, many of these chaps have been told by the courts that it just isn't so.

There are certain rights that farmers have, but more and more they're finding that nonfarm rural residents have rights also. And they also have the know-how and political power to cause some real problems. There have been instances in nearby states where farming operations have actually been closed down by complaining

neighbors, armed with proper court injunctions.

Granted, those are extreme cases, but they do happen. And when they do it clouds all of agriculture, leaving farmers to wonder if they do in fact have the right to farm.

In Pennsylvania, farm organizations have pushed a right-to-farm bill through the state legislature that says any farmer who has been farming a piece of ground for at least three years can continue as long as he isn't actually endangering anyone's health or breaking any other laws. The real intent of the bill is to stop the nuisance kinds of legal actions that continue to harass farmers.

Some Pennsylvania farmers with their backs to the wall have had to come up with some fairly creative solutions to their farm

nuisance problems. Perhaps the most creative comes from a Lancaster County farmer who was in trouble for spreading manure. This is a true story told to me firsthand recently at a Farm-City Seminar in Harrisburg.

It seems this Pennsylvania Dutch gentleman had been operating a dairy farm for years. Recently he got the opportunity to buy a neighboring farm, but he only wanted the land so he let someone else purchase an old farmhouse on the property.

As luck would have it, some city dwellers came out and bought the house, fixed it up, and then set about changing the agricultural practices of the neighborhood. They objected to the manure handling mess so strongly that the wife got herself elected to the township planning commission and then launched a one person campaign to stop the farmer from spreading manure on the ground that surrounded her home.

She was about to succeed with her effort when the farmer hit upon a plan. It seems that the township was authorized one trailer park in its zoning plans, and at that point there were none. So the farmer contacted his lawyer and an engineer, and they drew up plans for a trailer park on the land surrounding that nice lady's

Then at the proper township meeting, the lawyer asked a few questions and was assured that indeed the township was allowed to have a trailer park. That's when he started unrolling his blueprints.

There it was for everyone to see. A nice big mobile home park, complete with streets, sewers, and places for lots and lots of those movable dwellings. And right in the middle, that lovely rural residence.

The commission had no choice but to approve the plan, but you can bet the lady wasted no time meeting with the farmer to discuss his intentions and to assure him that she would much rather have him spreading manure around her property than installing mobile homes.

So they compromised. He moved in one mobile home for one of his farm workers and the rural residents stopped worrying about his manure handling techniques. We can only assume that they will all live happily ever after in that thriving farm community.

Not every farmer can solve his farm-city problems in such a creative way. But there are other things that can be done. For example, the Morrison Pork Unit in Salina, Kansas, uses personal contacts with its urban neighbors to promote better understanding. This operation, which markets 36,000 hogs a year, conducts guided tours for city folks who are curious about what's going on. School groups are especially welcomed and seem to appreciate this look at modern agriculture.

A Delavan, Illinois farmer operates right next door to the city park and so to keep his neighbors pleased with his 800-acre corn and hog farm, he worries about things like wind direction when he's spreading manure and he works

around major events going on in the park. Most of the manure is knifed into the soil, but in the winter when the ground is frozen and this can't be done, he spreads a on fields farthest away from town. And on an even more positive note, during special holidays he hands out packages of whole hog sausage, and even plants sweet corn for people who don't have garden space.

In all of these instances it might have been easier for the farmers to simply insist that they were there first and that if the city folk don't like it, they could move. After all, these are strong agricultural areas where such farming operations are traditional and anybody living near them should expect such nuisances. But that's just begging for trouble.

Any farmer with the least bit of thoughtfulness knows that a family reunion in the city park won't benefit from a light mist of liquid manure. And he should also know that a community that gets mad enough can generate a lot of wrath when it's aimed at a farmer who's causing problems.

Right-to-farm legislation is on the books in many states, but it seems to me far better to solve rural-urban problems in other ways. No doubt some farmers need to clean up their acts; and some urbanites need to realize that, if they're going to live in the country, it won't be the same as downtown. There should be give and taken on both sides and there's surely room for both farm and nonfarm folks in rural America.

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