

# Lehigh Conservation Farmers Worry About Development, Regulations, Blight

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**GERMANSVILLE** (Lehigh Co.) — Forrest Wessner said he has never built a house on any of the property he owns in Heidelberg Township. "If you want to have a farm, you have a farm. If you want to have housing, you have housing. The two don't work well together."

Many agree. One day, while plowing some land for his potato crop, he was approached by someone living in a house nearby who was concerned about the "noise."

But it wasn't the noise of the tractor's diesel engine. According to wife Diana, it was the noise from the radio. The time of day? The middle of the afternoon!

Fortunately, according to Wessner, most of the neighbors are farming and understand the importance of preserving farmland. But increasing concerns about water quality, residential development, wetlands regulations, and other matters have kept the Wessners worried about the future of farming, since Wessner's son Forrest III took over after graduation from Penn State.

Wessner, along with wife Diana and son Forrest III and his wife Jessica, farm about 290 acres across several properties along the foot of the Blue Mountains. The Wessner family was honored recently as the Lehigh County's Conservation Farmers of the Year for their conservation work, their efforts to restore wetlands, and for land placed into the state's preservation program.

Here, according to Wessner, "people are born and raised with farming. They're not hard to deal with. But some people who move in from other areas don't understand the smells, the dusts, and the what-have-you of farming."

The Wessners grow about 70 acres of "table stock" potatoes for fresh market. The Wessners also maintain about 90 acres of alfalfa and grow about 40 acres of soybeans. The entire operation is cash cropped.

One of the concerns, according to Forrest Wessner, is last year's outbreak of potato blight, which caused about two acres of losses. Wet and cool conditions could create another outbreak this year — one that could be difficult for potato growers to deal with.

Wessner said that friends in Potter County "got kicked in the head" by the blight. "I'm really nervous about this year. This blight problem we're anxious about because there's no real good protection for it." Wessner explained that his spraying program was effective in keeping the blight problem under control, "but you can't always get in the fields when you should be spraying because of the weather."

"The weather is the key factor with anything you do in farming," he said. "It means everything."

Wessner has been keeping careful track of the research conducted by the universities on late blight control. What has him concerned is the lack of an adequate treatment in times of worsening conditions. Learning about control measures

proves challenging, according to the potato farmer, because he said, "talking about it in the classroom and then doing it in the field is a whole different ballgame."

He spotted the blight fungus on one variety that he grew and took steps to correct it. Another variety had the problem, but Wessner was reluctant to handle it. An outbreak

occurred, destroying the crop. Wessner blames the blight on poor seedstock and vows to inspect the potatoes this time around, even if

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Help in harvesting and packaging some of the potatoes, sold in 50-pound bags, comes from Stephanie and Pam, Wessner's daughters, and the grandkids. Diana said they help hand-harvest a few acres at the beginning of the season in late July. From left, Jessica, Forrest Jr., Diana, and Forrest Sr.



Forrest Wessner signed up all three farms they maintain under the state's farmland preservation program. The program has put strong reins on residential and commercial development on farmland. Here, Forrest stands with wife Diana and Rambo, their Saint Bernard. Photo by Andy Andrews