



Ohio Livestock Environmental Assurance Program

LEAP

“Helping livestock and poultry farmers take a proactive approach in blending sound production economics with concern about environmental quality.”

Building positive neighbor relations

Development throughout Ohio increasingly is bringing residential housing and non-farmers into agricultural areas. Many of these new residents have little or no previous exposure to agriculture and farming. They may have misconceptions about what activities occur on farms and in rural areas, and why these activities take place.

This fundamental change in rural Ohio has important implications for how you farm. Neighbors may complain about the noise or odors from your farm, or about agricultural practices — such as the application of pesticides or fertilizer — simply because they do not understand why these activities are necessary. In addition, many residents are concerned about environmental quality and the possible ways agriculture can affect the water they drink or water used for fishing or other recreational activities.



It is also important to realize that farm and non-farm neighbors have a lot in common. They care about their community and want to provide their family with the benefits of rural living. Farmers greatly benefit from being good neighbors. These benefits include pleasant relationships, maintaining a way of life, and ensuring the future success of the agricultural business.

The best public relations happen one-on-one. If you're a good neighbor, you provide the best possible public relations for your industry. Being a good neighbor means being considerate and responsible, and it means communicating with your neighbors. Farmers can reduce hassles by giving some thought to their farming practices. It is much easier and cheaper to simply prevent problems from escalating into conflict by communicating and building a trusting relationship with your neighbors. By doing this, it will also be much easier to discuss problems when they arise.

Step 1

The first step in achieving and maintaining a positive relationship with the public is to behave in a responsible manner. Comply with all regulations and, where possible, exceed minimum environmental standards. Respect and appreciate neighbors' concerns about your operation's impact on their quality of life and property values.

Step 2

The second step is to emphasize your positive behaviors and actions and improve the public's understanding of agriculture.

Consider the following:

- **Get to know your neighbors.** Getting to know your neighbors is the most important and simplest action you can take to help minimize conflicts. When you know your neighbors, it is easier to talk to them when problems occur and to keep problems from escalating into blame, misunderstandings, hard feelings or intense community conflict. Knowing your neighbors, communicating and having an “open door” policy makes it more likely that when they have a concern about your farm operation — such as noise or odor — they will call you directly to work it out instead of using other avenues, such as county or state government agencies or “word of mouth” gossip throughout the community. It also means that when you have a complaint about a neighbor — such as trespassing or littering — that they may be more open to discussing it with you. Make your communications a “two-way street.”

- **Talk to your neighbors.** According to many farmers, talking with your neighbors and letting them know what you are doing is very important. Farmers who take the time to explain their practices often head off conflicts with neighbors. Good communication builds trust and allows you to discuss problems with your neighbors in a peaceful and respectful way. It also helps neighbors learn that you are approachable and interested in their concerns. If a neighbor does have a complaint about your farm, it



LEAP is coordinated and administered by the Ohio Livestock Coalition (OLC) in cooperation with program partners. OLC's purpose and mission is to assist Ohio's livestock and poultry sector in expanding its positive contributions to the Buckeye State. In achieving its mission, the OLC affirms an industry that is environmentally friendly, socially responsible and economically viable, and the development and communication of a unified message.
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is better that they feel comfortable enough to approach you directly instead of you hearing of it secondhand.

Keep your neighbors informed of pending changes and actions, such as communicating manure or pesticide management plans, including times and potential locations for application. Working with your neighbors, determine dates or locations that should be avoided. Notify your neighbors of any changes you propose, and explain changes in detail. Leave your door open and be flexible in dealing with changes in your neighbors' plans, such as special events. This includes other farmers.

When new neighbors move into the community, visit with them and invite them to visit the farm. If you have a lot of neighbors, consider developing a newsletter to be sent on a regular basis to neighbors to keep them informed about what's going on at the farm.

Think of your neighbors as customers. After all, they do purchase agricultural products (food, clothing, building materials, etc.). You may also wish to recruit your neighbors as potential, direct customers (freezer beef or pork, farm markets, pick-your-own produce, straw or other types of bedding materials for gardens and landscaping, manure or mulch for flower or vegetable gardens, firewood for home or recreational use, 4-H/FFA livestock projects, etc.). Neighbors may also be a source of farm needs, such as used newspapers for livestock bedding or labor for summer farm help.

- **Be a good neighbor yourself.** If you expect your neighbors to be good neighbors, you must also be a good neighbor to them. Being neighborly means being friendly to your neighbors, helping them when needed, and being willing to accommodate them. It's the small things that matter when establishing and maintaining good relations with neighbors. Be helpful. When the snow flies, consider helping your neighbors "dig out" if you have a snowplow or blower.

- **Just use common sense.** Simply using common sense can make a big difference in minimizing conflicts with neighbors. The timeliness of farming means that you sometimes do not have much choice about when you plant, spray or harvest. Often, however, you do have some control over when you do farm tasks. Applying manure on holiday weekends or a day when you know a neighbor is planning a picnic or cookout, or spraying chemicals on a windy day, for example, will do little to build community harmony. Communicate and make plans with your neighbors, including other farmers, regarding application times and intervals for manure and chemicals. Cleaning equipment and making sure it is operating properly can minimize the chance of manure, mud or something else being dropped onto a public roadway. If something is deposited onto a public road by your equipment and machinery, clean it up immediately — never allow it to remain on the road for any period of time!

- **Timing is everything.** Develop a farm management plan that takes into account neighbors as well as the environment while maximizing the value of farm inputs (manure, fertilizers, pesticides, feed, etc.). For example, the cost of injecting or composting manure is very small compared to upset neighbors. Encourage your neighbors to let you know about times when a fresh dose of manure would infringe on their entertainment plans. Spread manure in the most environmentally friendly method, so crops can absorb the nutrients. Take time to explain what you do and why. For example, spreading manure on cropland recycles nutrients and puts the manure to productive use. If possible, consider adopting management plans that include injecting or incorporating manure to reduce odors and run-off. Carefully select manure application locations to minimize the chances of odors coming in contact with nearby residences.

- **Location, location, location.** Consider location and visibility when planning new facilities or modifying existing sites. Consider distance from roads, neighbors, public areas (parks, streams, schools, churches, lakes, etc.). Study prevailing wind patterns and topography and consider how neighbors might be affected by odors. With existing facilities, consider utilizing fences and trees that provide windbreaks and dilute odors by mixing them with air currents and turbulence.

- **Comply with all regulations.** If feasible, go beyond the minimum standards required. If possible, exceed recommended setback requirements, even if setback requirements are voluntary, when building new facilities or modifying existing sites. Some added cost at construction might be money well invested in the long term.



"The best way to be a good farmer is to be a good neighbor. Being a good neighbor means being helpful and taking the time to communicate with neighbors."

— **Jim Zehringer**
Meiring Poultry Farm
Celina, Ohio



"Build a bank account of goodwill within the community you live and work. We work hard to accumulate that bank account of goodwill. And we spend it wisely. When things happen that reduce that bank account, I get real uptight, because that will affect the ability of future generations to be able to farm."

— **Tom Price, livestock farmer**
Delaware County

"Good fences make good neighbors."

— **Robert Frost**
Mending Wall



“Not only do we have to be good stewards of the land, air and water, but also good neighbors as well. Sound science will ensure that we, as producers, will manage our farms in an environmentally responsible manner. Sound people skills will ensure that we, as producers, will be able to continue in animal agriculture.”

— **Bryan Black, Ned Black & Sons Canal Winchester, Ohio**



“We believe these practices just make good sense. With pressing urbanization, your farm’s appearance helps to have good relations with non-farming neighbors.”

— **Tom and Elaine Freer Klever Holstein Farm Fredericktown, Ohio**



“It does make a difference. Knowing your neighbors and trusting your neighbors makes a difference.”

— **Jeff Sharp assistant professor of human and community development College of Food, Agriculture & Environmental Sciences The Ohio State University**

• **A little gesture of friendship goes a long way.** Doing occasional favors for neighbors can help build positive relationships. These favors need not be expensive or time consuming, because they primarily serve as tokens of friendship and acceptance. If you have a garden, during the summer time share your bounty of sweet corn or other produce with your neighbors. If you raise livestock, invite your neighbors to the farm for a barbecue or hog roast.

If you have a garden tiller or plow, consider plowing your neighbors’ gardens to help them get started in raising produce or flowers.

• **Make your farm attractive.** The appearance of your farm plays an important role in determining what neighbors and others think about you and your farm operation. The farm’s appearance is a reflection of the farmer’s professionalism, competence and concern about controlling problems. A farm

that is known as a neighborhood eyesore will have less goodwill in the community and get less public empathy or sympathy if problems arise. An overwhelming majority of the public only comes in contact with farms when they drive by them, and people who drive by a farm “smell with their eyes, not their noses.”

Think of your farm as a storefront or billboard advertisement for agriculture. Develop a landscape plan that keeps production facilities and manure storage units from becoming an eyesore and blends facilities into the landscape. Use landscaping techniques that project a positive image to viewers of your operation. Consider the use of screening, hills, berms, earth tone colors, colors perceived as “clean” and “healthy,” low noise fans, shrubs and flowers, and decorative fences.

The benefits and time invested in developing an eye-appealing farm will far outweigh the costs. Additionally, the landscaping and maintenance around the farm buildings may be an excellent 4-H or FFA career development project opportunity for your, or neighbors’, children or grandchildren. At the same time, non-farm neighbors may be an excellent source of landscape design and maintenance plans and resources.

Don’t overlook safety features that may also contribute to the farm’s aesthetics. Maintain fences and secure areas around all farm storage facilities (grain, fuel, manure, chemicals, etc.) and farm ponds. Keep a life preserver in a conspicuous location at all farm ponds, regardless if recreational activities occur or are permitted.

• **Invite neighbors over the fence.** It is easy to complain about things that we are not familiar with, but more difficult once they are understood. Few people have direct experience with agriculture, let alone farming, anymore. It is not surprising then that many non-farming neighbors have little knowledge about what happens on farms. Showing neighbors what you do on your farm and why those activities are necessary can help them realize that you are not out doing fieldwork in the middle of the night simply to annoy them.

Explain why, at planting and harvest times, farmers must work late into the night and on weekends. If they know there’s an end to the extra noise, traffic and lights, they’ll be more tolerant. Consider having an open house or picnic for neighbors, then use the time to talk about what you do and why. Explain why you farm and that it is your way of life and business. Explain how you operate your business and facility, why farming is reasonable where you are located, and the steps you have taken to be sensitive to the concerns of your neighbors. Demonstrate the environmental, animal, human and personal safeguards you have in your operation.

Take opportunities to educate. Invite the neighbor’s children over for “show and tell” on the farm involving a newborn animal or picking berries, something that involves “fun learning” — feel, see and touch. Most kids do science fair projects. See if there’s a way that you can help them.

• **You don’t solve anything by being hard-nosed or arrogant.** How you respond to complaints or concerns expressed by neighbors often will determine whether the issue grows into anger, resentment and major conflict. Farmers who have already established friendly relationships with their neighbors will find it easier to avoid such conflict.

• **Establish a complaint system.** Encourage neighbors to contact you first before taking other actions. Respond promptly and genuinely to all complaints by communicating directly with your neighbors. Do not dismiss any complaint as being unreasonable or attributing it to a lack of understanding or knowledge about farming. When mistakes happen, take responsibility and appropriate corrective actions.



- **Be active in the community.** Actions you take on your farm are important, but do not forget that becoming involved in community-level activities also can improve farm/non-farm relationships. The agricultural community can take steps to better educate the public about farming and farmers' needs. Encourage your local agricultural organizations to become involved in educational activities and outreach programs for non-farmers, and support those efforts.

Support the local community with your business. If feasible, buy inputs locally and use local services such as veterinarian and builders. Support local events such as charities, school programs, community celebrations and scholarship programs.

- **Farm/Non-farm conflict.** Sometimes problems arise among farm and non-farm neighbors. The best method of handling these situations is by neighbors calmly discussing the problem. Unresolved problems can result in conflict that permanently damages the relationship.

Neighbors involved in a disagreement can develop mutually acceptable solutions if they are willing to set aside strongly held positions, be truthful with themselves and others about their true interests, and openly exchange ideas. Building trust is essential to working through these problems. Follow these steps toward resolving the conflict:

1. Carefully select the time and location for the discussion. Sitting down in neutral territory may help. Asking someone to facilitate the meeting who is skillful in mediation and does not have an interest in the outcome may also help.
2. Listen carefully to the other person. Respect and try to understand the other person's feelings and needs.
3. Define the problem in clear, concrete terms.
4. Work together to generate as many solutions as you can, taking care not to pass judgment on other's ideas.
5. Research the possible solutions to problems. Learn what new methods and technologies can assist in solving the problem. Consult with various agencies, such as The Ohio State University Extension (OSUE), local soil and water conservation district (SWCD) or the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for up-to-date research-based information.
6. Reach an agreement on the most workable solution — one that all involved understand and can live with.
7. Establish a way to check on how the solution is working.
8. If the other person does not live up to his or her end of the bargain, re-state the problem and agreed-upon solution, and inform the other person what your next step will be if the problem is not resolved as agreed upon.

Legal action should only be considered if the other person does not work toward the agreed-upon solution or refuses to meet to discuss the issue. Taking legal action can be expensive and often means that the people involved have little control of the outcome.



Living together in rural areas has many rewards. Today's rural neighbors can enjoy the lifestyle and new friendships that result from understanding and tolerance. Building strong relationships is the best way to create the kind of community that both farm and non-farm residents want to call home.

Developing and improving your relationship with your neighbors, especially if some of them are new to your community, can be one of the most important activities you do to help your farm survive in a changing environment. Demonstrating through actions and words your respect for your neighbors, community and the environment will build a trusting relationship that will return unlimited benefits to you and your industry.

Helping your neighbors understand activities on your farm and fostering goodwill can be beneficial to all; neighbors may understand your needs better and have more respect for you and your concerns. Your new neighbors also may help you find ways to avoid needless conflicts with them concerning your farm activities. You may discover that you have more in common with your neighbors than you thought.

Building public relations will cost money and time, and should be viewed as a cost of doing business, as well as inexpensive insurance. The overall investment of time and money depends upon individual circumstances. Those operations with more neighbors or in situations that are "stressed" may have to invest more than others. However, regardless of the situation, do not overlook the importance of developing positive relations with any neighbor. If done appropriately, timely and in a pro-active manner, public relations can be money and time well spent and invested. Don't wait for problems to develop first before implementing public relations strategies.

Responsible behavior and good public relations are necessary to operate successfully. Careful attention to these principles may make it possible to avoid situations that could threaten your farm and your industry.

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