



The small group of men sat around the kitchen table talking and drinking mugs of steaming-hot coffee. All were farmers. The type of operations represented in the group were diversified. Five were beef cattle breeders. One ran a dairy operation, another a swine finishing operation. The eighth raised crops.

The reason for meeting on this cold wintry night in central Pennsylvania was not to talk about the usual farm subjects, but to protect their farmland against the encroachment of urban sprawl and its ensuing problems.

The main objective of the meeting was to form a group of nonadjacent farmland parcels consisting of a total minimum area of 500 acres. After this criterion is met, the next step will be to petition the local and state governments to declare it an Agricultural Area under the Agricultural Area Security Act 43 of 1981.

By becoming part of a designated Agricultural Area, the farmers are entitled as participating landowners to special consideration from local and state government. Under these provisions, a

THE RIGHT TO FARM

*Eastern farmers
work to overcome
problems of
urban sprawl.*

by Janet Mayer



local government unit may not impose regulations which unreasonably restrict farm structures or practices, nor may normal farming operations be termed a "nuisance" when carried out properly and with care. State government agencies must also modify their administrative regulations and procedures, including special reviews in cases where local authorities propose condemning agricultural land. This would ensure that all reasonable and prudent alternatives are considered.

In Pennsylvania, as in many other states, the problem of farms surviving in an ever-expanding urban explosion is an ongoing battle. Starting in the 1950s, technology gave the country the ability to build the American highway system. The highways emptied the cities, and suburban living and commuting became a way of life. Commuting has reduced many rural areas to subdivisions where asphalt and concrete cover areas that once supported crops and livestock. It also affects small towns that are the nucleus of these agricultural communities.

Neighborly Advice

What farmer does not dread the call at dinner time or in the middle of the night from an irate neighbor informing him that his livestock is in the middle of their lawn eating flowers or stomping their newly planted grass.

Since urban sprawl isn't something that is going to go away, farm families have to learn to deal with their neighbors. Farmers cannot have the attitude that they were on the land first and the neighbors will just have to adjust to what goes on in a farming operation. The easiest course is the one with the least resistance, meaning good neighbor relations are a must. Here are some suggestions:

1. Practice good management and keep a neat appearance around your farm,

This gives neighbors a better perception and attitude toward the farm and your family. This can go a long way in establishing and preserving good relations with neighbors.

2. Try to keep a good line of communication open with your neighbors.

This is not to suggest that you have to become bosom buddies with them, but let them know who you are.

One farmer in the Northeast says he or one of his family members make it a point to stop by the home of someone who has just moved onto the fringes of his farm. If corn or some other vegetable is in season, he will take along a sample gift. He introduces himself and acquaints people with his operation. He invites them to come to the barn to see the setup.

He has found many of these people have never been on a farm before. At least once a year, he gives corn and sometimes hamburger to most of the people who surround his farmland. He also sends them Christmas cards. If time permits, he and his son plow snow for the neighbors during the winter. He and his family have found the relationship with neighbors to be good.

3. Use good manure handling etiquette.

Don't stack manure piles near a road. Above all else, try to avoid spreading manure right before the weekend or a holiday. Letting your neighbors know when you will be cleaning out your manure pit or spreading is also a good idea. When spreading, keep a comfortable distance from neighbors' homes.

4. Keep fencing in good repair.

This makes life easier all around. Farmers do not like chasing livestock, and neighbors do not like livestock in their yards and gardens.

One farmer had a problem with neighbors whose property lines border his fences. They would dump garbage, used building materials and other debris over the fence into the pasture. After he explained to these neighbors that his cattle will eat this type of garbage, and cuts on their feet could result, the problem stopped. Most people don't realize the results of their actions.

Another farmer kept getting calls from a woman who had property that bordered his fence line. She would call him and say his cows were in her garden. When he would arrive, he would find one calf out. The problem being, she had planted her garden to the edge of the fence. An open invitation to the calf for an extra snack. The farmer suggested she plant her garden back about 25 feet. This solved the problem.



"Uh oh, I think the neighbors pooled their money and got a lawyer."

With the increased access to rural land came the development of industrial parks with their immense buildings and huge parking lots, gobbling up land that had formerly been tilled fields and pastures. With industry came more people, and with them came the need for more housing.

National figures show one to three million acres of farmland lost each year. Between 1975 and 1985, in Pennsylvania alone, about 900,000 acres was lost. To halt this loss, the state Legislature approved a program in 1987 that relies on conservation easements which are legal agreement requiring property owners to permanently keep their land in agriculture or undeveloped in exchange for a cash payment.

The state's voters approved a \$100 million bond issue in 1988 to fund the program. Payment is based on the difference between the property's agricultural and development value.

Coming Up With Solutions

The American Farmland Trust, a private, not-for-profit membership organization founded in 1980, is working to stop the loss of productive farmland and to promote farming practices leading to a healthy environment. In fact, the organization staff helped draft the legislation in Pennsylvania for the farmland protection measure in 1987.

Ralph E. Grossi, president of Farmland Trust, says the figures on prune farmland that has been permanently lost do not tell the whole story. "For every acre developed, several more are crippled for agricultural production as a result of conflicts with neighboring subdivisions, crop damage, restrictions on farming practices and increased risk of lawsuits. The figures don't allow for the simple fact that in any given area, the loss of farmland can have a dramatic impact on the fiscal, social and cultural well-being of local communities. For, ultimately, despite its importance to the nation, farmland protection is a local issue and each community should have the option to retain farming as a part of its future."

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, is a county that has had more problems dealing with an influx of people than most rural areas. Leon Ressler, Lancaster County Extension agent, says agriculture is the county's largest industry with sales of more than \$8 million a year by 18,000

farms. The county would have to be one of the top producing counties in the United States, rated along with the irrigated counties in California.

With a countywide population of 425,000 — 243,000 urban, 179,000 rural, the ratio is 10 people for every farm. Tourism — generating about 8 million visitors yearly — is another facet that adds to the congestion. One of the main tourist attractions are the Amish, a religious sect who make up a large part of the agricultural community.

"I feel much of this influx of people into the county is due to making Lancaster a bedroom community for Harrisburg and Philadelphia," Ressler says. "But I feel the farmer needs to take advantage of the market created by these people and revamp to satisfy the demand. They also need to use common sense in dealing with their neighbors."

In nearby Salunga and New Holland, farmers have created a situation that, according to Dr. John Comerford, Extension beef specialist for Pennsylvania State University, has caused them trouble. Many farmers in this area sold acreage from their farms that fronted along township roads.

"Actually these farmers shot themselves in the foot, so to speak," Comerford explains. "Many of them owed money on their farms, and when they were approached about selling frontage to people to build homes, they were agreeable. They used the money to pay off their farms, but they also created a problem for themselves, because many of these new people decided they didn't want the runoff, odors and flies that came with being located on the outer fringes of a farm."

In 1991 the Lancaster Chamber of Commerce felt there was a need to recognize agriculture for the major role it plays in the county. To achieve this goal, the chamber established the position of manager of agricultural services.

Jay Howes, who grew up on a dairy farm in Pennsylvania, was hired to fill the position. By utilizing Howes as spokesman, the chamber of commerce felt there was an opportunity to coordinate activities and promotion of agriculture. They also dealt with growth and preservation issues, which were of vital importance in the fast-growing county. The main goal of the position is to provide an overall climate as healthy as possible for agriculture. The chamber feels Howes



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has made positive strides in the three years he has held the position by building communications bridges between farmers and the business community.

Even though the county is largely agricultural, there is a large number of people living in the county who understand little about agricultural production. Since the general public influences statewide policy, public attitudes can affect the ease with which farmers can do business.

"No one epitomizes the free enterprise philosophy better than the farmer," Howes says. "If a farmer is making a decent return on his investment, then development money has less appeal. So one of the best ways to combat the pressure on farmland is to keep farming profitable."

State Protection of the Right to Farm

On the state level, most states have had to develop legislation to protect farmers from litigation that denies

farmers the right to farm. In Michigan, the Right to Farm Act was passed in 1981. The purpose of the legislation is to protect farmers from being sued by their neighbors who do not like the odors, flies and dirt that are the result of everyday farming.

Farmers, on the other hand, should conform to generally accepted agriculture management practices. Conformance is strictly voluntary. For farmers who practice good management in relation to manure handling, pesticide use and nutrient utilization, they gain protection from civil nuisance suits. It also provides farmers with exemption status from several state environmental laws and permit policies.

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) reached an agreement in 1989, designating the MDA as the primary investigator for all non-emergency, agriculturally-related pollution complaints. If MDA detects a pollution problem, the farmer, under the agreement revised in 1993, has 60 days to correct it. If he does not comply, the complaint goes to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources under standard pollution investigation policy.

Common Sense Approach Needed

Experts in the field say there probably is no single solution. Will it get better? Dr. Comerford says he hopes it will. But he feels as farmers, you are a representative of the agricultural industry as a whole, and, therefore, must be sensitive to the perception of the industry by the public.

On the other side of the coin, it is wrong for people who are new rural residents to think that just because they don't like the odors or the flies, they are going to put the farmer out of business.

Jay Howes believes the key to good public relations is to be mannerly in all dealings with the public, especially your neighbors, and to remember that the general public is uneducated about agriculture in general. Most have no concept of where their food comes from or how it is produced. Educate them that the food chain does not begin at the grocery store.