

GOOD

NEIGHBORS

Cattle producers from across the country share their thoughts on what it takes to be a good neighbor.

Story & photo by **Troy Smith**, field editor

It's part of "The Code of the West" ... or the East, North or South, for that matter. Like hospitality, fair play, loyalty and respect for the land, most cattle folk rank neighborliness among their unwritten rules of personal conduct. While they tend to be of the independent and self-reliant sort, cattle producers usually see value in being on friendly terms with their neighbors.

We asked representatives of different kinds of cattle operations, located in different

parts of the country, to explain what they think it takes to be a good neighbor. They graciously agreed to tell about their efforts to maintain neighborly relations with other area farmers and ranchers, as well as the nonagricultural people residing in their respective communities.

Five Star Land & Livestock, *Wilton, Calif.*

"We have wonderful neighbors," states Abbie Nelson, whose family operates registered- and commercial-Angus cattle in increasingly suburban Sacramento County. Theirs is one of the few working ranches

remaining in an area where most residents live on small acreages.

"Many come from non-ag backgrounds and moved here wanting a more rural lifestyle," tells Nelson. "Most are genuinely interested in knowing more about ranching. We've found that the more they learn and really understand what we do and why we do it, the stronger our relationships become."

According to Nelson, her family takes every opportunity to engage in friendly interaction,

whether pausing a few minutes to visit across a shared fence, or mixing with neighbors at community and county events. The family also shares produce from the ranch's large vegetable garden.

"We put our neighbors to the test a couple of years ago when we tore up a pasture to establish a vineyard. It created a lot of dust and noise," admits Nelson, "but we had explained what we were going to do and the purpose. Our neighbors really appreciated knowing what was going on. Some were excited about the possibility of someday sampling wine from the grapes we'd grow. There were no complaints,

because we made an effort to show consideration for them."

Five Star Land and Livestock also leases property in a more remote area where the neighbors are fellow ranchers. Here the age-old "neighboring" customs remain intact. Ranches often exchange help with seasonal cattle work. They cooperate to maintain fences and return stray cattle.

"It's all very reciprocal. We depend on each other," says Nelson.

Five Star relies heavily on a particular neighbor who supplies stock water to Nelson cattle. It's a business arrangement, so Five Star pays for the water.

"We give him something extra to show our appreciation," adds Nelson. "Doing a little more than is expected helps build good relationships with neighbors."

Padlock Ranch, *Ranchester, Wyo.*

According to custom, as well as most states' fence laws, neighboring landowners share equally the responsibility for maintaining fences common to both. Trey Patterson, CEO for Padlock Ranch Co., believes the best neighbors possess a willingness to do more than their share. He figures that approach should go beyond fixing fence.

With deeded and leased land totaling some 475,000 acres in Wyoming and Montana, the Padlock has plenty of neighbors. They include ranching outfits of various kinds and sizes, plus the Crow Indian Reservation. Patterson says all are part of the Padlock's "community."

"One of our business goals is to be a positive member of the community," states Patterson. "We share labor with our ranching neighbors, and if they experience a natural disaster such as a fire or flood, we're going to be aggressive about helping them, and we're willing to do more than what might be considered our equitable share."

As an example, Patterson cites an instance where a neighboring ranch was fighting a growing problem with prairie dogs. While there were few prairie dogs on adjacent Padlock range, and controlling them was not a priority, the Padlock contributed to the effort anyway.

"I think communication is key, even if it's just calling and telling a neighbor when we're planning to turn cattle into a pasture next to his," adds Patterson. "It's important to talk to your neighbors about what you are doing, but also listen to their concerns and help them however you can."

To further friendly communication and strengthen relationships, the Padlock also hosts an annual picnic and invites families from neighboring ranches. Padlock Ranch



tours are hosted periodically, providing educational opportunities for people within and outside the beef industry.

“We want to have a positive impact locally, but also through industry involvement at the state and national levels, too. We’re trying to be engaged at every level,” says Patterson, who often speaks at beef industry conferences and shares from the Padlock experience. “We want to leave things better than we found them. That’s part of being a good neighbor.”

Kraft Livestock, *Fort Collins, Colo.*

Urban sprawl has brought Colorado’s fourth-most-populous city ever nearer the cattle and farming operation of Bob Kraft and his family. On the farm where he was born and raised, Kraft cultivates some 1,200 acres of feed crops and maintains a 3,500-head capacity backgrounding yard. Kraft’s two sons are involved, but also run their own cow-calf enterprise.

Just a half-mile away are the Fort Collins city limits. Conscious of his urban neighbors and wanting to foster a positive image for the beef industry in addition to his family’s business, Kraft emphasizes good stewardship. He tries to demonstrate a neighborly concern for how the operation impacts the community’s appearance and the environment.

“We try to keep the place looking neat by not letting trash and junk accumulate and keeping the weeds mowed,” explains Kraft. “We clean our feedlot pens regularly and disc in manure as soon as it’s spread on our fields. That helps hold down odor. And we control the flies using predatory wasps.”

Kraft has been actively involved in the community by maintaining memberships in area organizations and serving on governing boards. He’s supportive of the local and state cattlemen’s associations, too.

“A big part of being a good neighbor is recognizing when people need help and then doing what you can for them,” says Kraft. “We all need help sooner or later.”

Adams Land & Cattle LLC, *Broken Bow, Neb.*

With a combined capacity for more than 130,000 head at three finishing yards, Adams Land & Cattle is Nebraska’s largest cattle-feeding company and feedlot research-and-development facility. Rooted in central Nebraska for more than 100 years, the Adams family believes resource stewardship is the responsibility of every good neighbor.

According to Adams spokesperson Liz Babcock, best management practices implemented across the company’s farming enterprises include shifting more acreage to

no-till and strip-till methods, and adhering to agronomic application rates established by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Department of Environmental Quality.

In the feedlot, the company has gone beyond regulatory requirements to guard against runoff discharges during rain events. A sprinkler system is employed to control dust in feeding pens, and tank trucks routinely apply water to control dust on access roads. When manure and effluent is applied to company farmland, consideration is given to the time of the day, wind direction and whether there are any community events occurring. Area farmers can also purchase manure and compost to help improve soil fertility.

According to Babcock, community involvement has included a focus on youth. It began 25 years ago with an outreach to local schools. Since then, Adams personnel have annually interacted with third-grade classes, talking with students and teachers about agriculture, the beef industry and what goes on at Adams Land & Cattle. The outreach to area students has expanded to include interaction with eighth-graders and high-school sophomores. Additionally, the company hires many high school and college students as interns and welcomes students to participate in its job-shadow program.

“Students can gain experience, develop skills, make connections and strengthen their résumés,” says Babcock. “They can learn about a field and assess their own interest and abilities.”

Adams Land & Cattle also partners with University of Nebraska Extension to provide interactive education and animal Quality Assurance (QA) training for up to 150 area youths annually. It’s one more way the company tries to set an example of neighborliness through the giving of time, talent and monetary support of the community. Adams employees are encouraged to do the same.

“We have developed a Community Involvement Committee that creates, plans and sponsors events and activities that benefit communities in the county — events like food drives for local food banks, school backpack programs, fundraisers for charities and an annual Christmas giving tree,” explains Babcock, noting how the Adams Dollar for Doers program will match employee donations of volunteer hours for financial support of community organizations.

Sydenstricker Genetics, *Mexico, Mo.*

“I think a good neighbor is one that sets a good example,” says Ben Eggers, manager of Sydenstricker Genetics. “We try to do that by presenting a favorable image of our operation and agriculture in general. We try to set an example by showing up and taking part — taking an active role in our community and in our industry.”

Due to its location on the outskirts of town and along a much-traveled road, a lot of people drive past the Sydenstricker seedstock operation. It’s so close to town and prominent enough that, to Eggers’ way of thinking, the operation shares responsibility for making a positive impression on people traveling through the area. It’s important, therefore, to maintain a presentable appearance.

The farm sees plenty of visitors and frequently hosts local events, including high-school and college livestock judging contests. Sydenstricker Genetics often provides cattle for judging contests located elsewhere, whether nearby or on the other side of the state.

“We also host some groups that aren’t necessarily ag-oriented,” says Eggers, noting how groups of school students come for tours of the farm. An organization of young business leaders comes annually to learn about agriculture. Eggers welcomes these opportunities to put a local face on the beef industry and to correct some popular misperceptions of livestock production. He also speaks at Rotary Club meetings, sharing a similar message.

“As a result, more people know more about where their food comes from and how it is produced. They get to meet people that actually produce it, and maybe make a lasting connection. It’s important — as is involvement in your county cattlemen’s group and your state association,” states Eggers.

“I think it’s important to be a willing participant, starting at the local level,” he adds. “So when we’re asked to participate, we try. Even if it isn’t handy or easy to do it, we still try.”

Call it adherence to a code, creed, principle or precept, or just following the Golden Rule. Among these producers, the message conveyed consistently is that to have good neighbors, you have to be a good neighbor.



Editor’s Note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.