



Rural-Urban Interface Problems and Opportunities

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In many areas increasing numbers of people are moving onto small acreages or housing developments that are being located next to farmland. The result is often unhappiness as newcomers and old-timers with different expectations suddenly find themselves in conflict over issues such as noise, dust, odor, and scenic values. Here are a few representative scenarios:

- The farmer needs to harvest a crop as quickly as possible to avoid losing it to bad weather. The homeowner is kept awake by the noise and lights of the equipment.
- The farmer needs to prepare the land for planting. The homeowner greatly resents the blowing dust.
- The new homeowners bring with them better roads, security lighting, and other "improvements." The long term residents dislike the faster traffic, increases in car accidents, and their inability to see the stars anymore.

Farming with residential areas nearby is difficult. Living next door to a farm is likewise challenging, especially if you did not know what you were getting into when you moved. Often both sides feel they have been wronged and turn to government officials or the courts to support their side of the argument. Arguments typically end up being expensive for both sides and often there is no clear winner.

Part of the problem is that people who are new to rural areas may not understand what farming involves. Blowing dust from newly plowed fields can be reduced, but not eliminated. Odors associated with animal wastes can likewise be reduced, but perhaps not enough to satisfy those with sensitive noses. Harvesting crops is noisy and apt to disturb the sleep of neighbors. Farmers accept all these and other nuisances as the price of enjoying a lush crop growing or hay being cut, dried, and baled. New rural residents usually enjoy the same scenes, but fail to recognize the need for the less pleasing agricultural activities.

On the positive side, an influx of people into a rural area means that roads, utilities, and other services may change in ways that most will see as positive. Road signs, county-wide 911, rural fire and ambulance service, and many other improvements have been made by communities across the state taking advantage of rural development planning expertise from the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service.

Working Toward Solutions

When a cooperative attitude is established between people, mutually beneficial solutions are possible.

- Many conflicts between farmer and rural homeowners can be avoided through better **communication**. Neighbors

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need to talk to each other, discuss goals for the future of the land, and understand the need for compromises. Too often people pursue their own goals never thinking of anyone else until a conflict occurs. Community leaders should recognize that the "Us-Them" mentality is counterproductive and take steps to facilitate communication between different groups.

- **Planning** is essential in order to implement the most effective solutions. Leaving adequate separation distances between homes and farming activities is always desirable. The key is that all involved landowners must start communicating early and thinking about community as well as individual benefits.
- Protect or create **buffer areas** between farming operations and homes. Maintaining a good distance between farming operations and homes, in conjunction with source reduction efforts, is the best solution for odor and dust problems. Buffer areas also work well on most other problems.
- **Windbreaks and shelterbelts** are old ideas that are coming back in many parts of the country. In addition to benefiting the farm, trees can greatly reduce the level of light, noise, and dust. Trees can reduce odor by increasing dispersal through turbulence. Tree foliage also captures a limited amount of odorous gasses. Contact your local Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry - Forestry Services office for advice on establishing windbreaks and shelterbelts. More information on windbreaks is also available at <http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendlt/ec1772.pdf>.
- Agricultural and other **easements** can be implemented by forward thinking landowners to restrict the uses of property, often in perpetuity. For example, land placed into a perpetual agricultural easement will never be used for housing developments, strip malls, etc. Many government agencies and private entities are interested in protecting land uses that support agriculture and/or wildlife.
- When a serious conflict does arise, **mediation** is usually a much better choice than litigation. A trained mediator can often help both parties arrive at a solution in less time and for a much lower cost than the court system. Oklahoma State University offers such help through the Oklahoma Agriculture Mediation Program. For more information about this service, citizens should contact their county's Cooperative Extension Office.

Agriculture adds much to our quality of life, beyond food. On average, a well-managed farm is much more beneficial to the environment than a typical residential neighborhood. Well managed farms protect soil and water resources and can be very pleasing to the eye. However, farming loses if it is a matter of a few farmers against many homeowners. Farmers should realize this and understand it is to their benefit to work towards cooperative solutions.

The Bigger Picture – Long Term Damage

When rural land changes hands and newcomers begin moving onto smaller acreages or into housing developments, environmental damage may be a consequence. The very things that drew people to the countryside are often at risk – things like clean water, scenery, and an environment that supports desirable plants and wildlife. Poorly managed roads, construction, and other activities can erode soil, deposit sediment in creeks and lakes, and increase runoff. When too many homes are located in an area, natural fires are suppressed and beneficial prescribed fire may be too risky. As a result, eastern redcedar and other undesirable plant species can crowd out desirable species. Visual blight can also be a problem; one person's business can be another person's eyesore. The list of negative consequences associated with unplanned rural growth is a long one.

Citizens should visit with their leaders about their vision for the future of lakes, streams, productive farmland, scenery, and other environmental assets. Are there trends that threaten these assets, like the spread of eastern redcedar or rapidly eroding roads? It is important to consider the long range impact of failing to attempt mitigation of such negative trends. Farmland, residential developments, and wildland can only coexist if potential negative impacts are recognized and dealt with by all major stakeholder groups. If rapport can be established and good guy-bad guy stereotyping avoided, then compromise and consensus can improve the rural landscape.

Conclusion

There are basically three choices for shaping the future of the rural landscape:

Education and Voluntary Action

People need to learn about the entire range of land use options so they can make informed choices. Education and facilitation of discussion between stakeholders is essential if farmers and rural residents are to shape a desirable future. A neighborly attitude and good community leadership are essential if this approach is to work. A variety of state and federal agencies have expertise in different land use practices and community development. Educational programs are usually available through them.

Regulation

Good regulation requires community approval and participation as well as an understanding of the needs and problems of an area. Regulations can “grandfather in” existing land uses to minimize the impact on current landowners. Because most counties lack the funds to properly implement regulations and rural voters typically resist the idea of being regulated, this option is not likely to be widely implemented in the near term. For counties experiencing rapid growth, this may be the best option.

Do Nothing

This is the current mode in many locations. It usually results in a degraded environment and quality of life. Prevention is always cheaper than trying to restore a degraded landscape and community.

Which will the people of your community choose?

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