

The Rural/Urban Conflict

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For Lisa and Oliver Douglas of the old *Green Acres* TV show, country life or city life was an either/or proposition. Like the theme song said, the country offered “the chores” and “fresh air,” while the city boasted of “the stores” and “Time Square.”

In the real world of today, country life and city life are often not as distinctive. In many areas, retail centers, business parks, housing developments, and agricultural land all share the same landscape, blurring the lines between “urban” and “rural.” As the urban and rural “cultures” begin to co-mingle, conflicts can arise.

The Rush to the Country

More and more people are selling their urban and suburban homes and moving to the country. For some, the willingness to make longer commutes or the ability to work from home with a computer and telephone is giving them the freedom to live further from urban areas. In other cases, people are relocating to the country to retire or to work for the increasing number of business that have moved or expanded to rural areas. A recent *Time Magazine* cover article documented this phenomenon, profiling new rural residents and long-time rural residents, and the conflicts and challenges they are working through.

The article reports that rural areas have had a net inflow of 2 million Americans this decade—that is, 2 million more people have moved from metropolitan centers to rural areas than have gone the traditional

small-town-to-big-city route. By contrast, rural areas in the 1980’s had a net loss of 1.4 million people. Thanks to the newcomers, 75% of the nation’s rural counties are growing again after years of decline (Pooley, 1997).

People are moving to the country for a variety of reasons—the very reasons long-time rural residents stay in the country.

- **Escape from the City**—Some urban areas are plagued with above average crime, noise, and pollution, and decaying educational systems.
- **Rural Character**—The sense of place one feels in the countryside is attracting city dwellers. The serenity of scenic landscapes and the beautiful views lure many people away from the city.
- **Cheaper Housing**—Not only is the cost of a home usually less than that of a comparable home in the city, the cost of living is often more reasonable.
- **Opportunity to Work at Home**—With new technology, many more people are working at home. Where workers do their job doesn’t matter as much today as it did 20 years ago.
- **Industry Relocation**—Technology is decentralizing America for industry, too. The Internet and overnight shipping are enabling high-tech industries once tied to urban centers to settle in the countryside, creating jobs for skilled workers almost anywhere.

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The Clash of Cultures

Many new residents are finding that life in the country, with all its benefits, also brings some new challenges. Long-time rural residents, including farmers, are also facing new challenges, which seem to have arrived with their new neighbors. The different expectations and lifestyles of new move-ins and long-time residents can sometimes prompt complaints and lead to conflicts.

Farmers' Complaints

Some common complaints of farmers include increased amounts of trash and litter in fields and pastures, unleashed dogs disrupting or even killing livestock, trespassing and the liability that can be incurred, and the amount of increased vandalism to buildings, fences, and equipment.

Non-Farm Neighbors' Complaints

For the non-farm neighbor, most of the complaints concern the day-to-day operations of farming.

Typically, rural residents complain about noisy equipment such as tractors, grain dryers, and trucks. Other common complaints are about the dusty conditions that occur during planting and harvest periods, odors associated with livestock operations, farm chemicals and the fear of personal harm from them, and the inevitable wide, slow-moving farm equipment that moves up and down the roads and highways.

Differing Viewpoints

"What is that farmer doing out there?" "Why is that city slicker so upset?" It is likely that questions like these get asked pretty frequently. Farmers and non-farm residents have different ways of viewing their surroundings. Both need more understanding of the opposing point-of-view.

Both parties need more understanding of the other's desires. With such different points of view it is easy to understand why some farmers and non-farm residents feel they way they do. No one is either right or wrong.

Building Bridges & Cultivating Relationships

These types of conflicts are just a few of the potential problems that can arise between neighbors. There are certainly many others. The good news is that many of these conflicts can be worked through, and some can be avoided all together. Farmers, non-farm residents, and the community at large all have a role to play in maintaining good relationships. Everyone can enjoy the benefits of rural life if the stakeholders are willing to come together to deal with common problems.

There are specific steps that can be taken by farmers, non-farmers, and the community to help make rural living more enjoyable for everyone. The steps below are adapted from *Cultivating Farm, Neighbor, and Community Relations*, a publication from Cornell University (Hilchey and Leonard, 1995).

What Farmers Can Do

Farmers can use a number of strategies to head off potential conflict and build stronger ties with their non-farm neighbors and their local communities.

Implement responsible & defensible farm management practices.

It is important to realize that commonly accepted practices in agricultural areas are not always in the best interest of neighbors or others in the community. Everyday, farmers and researchers learn more about controlling odors, dusts, insects, weeds, and noises. There are cost-sharing programs to protect groundwater supplies and to implement integrated pest management strategies. Farmers should take advantage of these technological advances if at all possible.

Figure 1. Different Viewpoints

Non-Farm Neighbor	Farming Neighbor
▪You're creating nasty odors.	▪I'm just hauling out my manure and recycling waste.
▪You're making a lot of noise.	▪I'm getting started early and working late.
▪You're killing me with deadly chemicals.	▪I'm controlling weeds and bugs that kill my crops
▪I'm mulching your field with my grass clippings.	▪You're throwing trash in my field.
▪We shouldn't have to close all our windows because of the dust.	▪A little dust won't hurt you.

In this information age, a single farmer cannot possibly keep up with all the technological advances. Using the advice of private consultants, university specialists, county Extension educators, and other experts is a good way to keep up with new developments. Organizations like the Natural Resources Conservation Service and FSA are also sources of helpful information.

Get involved in the community.

Farmers should make a sincere effort to get to know their neighbors and get involved in community projects. Sitting on a planning board or taking on other community leadership roles is an empowering experience. Social

institutions like places of worship, civic groups, and charities provide informal opportunities to discuss problems and find solutions.

Promote benefits of the farm to neighbors and community.

Although generosity takes time and resources, simple gestures, like the ones listed in Figure 2, are great ways to build bridges and create a stronger sense of community. Small favors, however, can sometimes lead to requests for larger favors. Farmers should be aware of how much can be done and not hesitate to say no. It is also important to realize that some activities can necessitate more liability insurance. Attorney and insurance broker can be contacted for this kind of information.

What Non-Farmers Can Do

If non-farm residents have a problem with something a farmer is doing, they should go directly to the farmer. It is important to bear in mind that the way a farmer is approached can determine how he or she might respond. Farmers may also resent having to spend time and money to solve what they perceive is “someone else’s” problem. Any of these solutions require all parties to participate and have a willingness to resolve the situation. Some bridge building tips for non-farmers are listed in Figure 3.

What the Community Can Do

The community wishing to minimize conflict should rely less on lawsuits, right-to-farm laws, and zoning ordinances, and work more informally with farmers and other local residents to mitigate or mediate conflict. Figure 4 lists some of the steps a community can take to minimize potential conflicts.

Figure 2. Bridge Builders for Farmers

▪Give farm tours.	▪Provide garden space.
▪Host community picnics.	▪Sponsor sports teams.
▪Organize hay rides.	▪Plow snow.
▪Give away free manure.	▪Publish newsletters and memos.

Figure 3. Bridge Builders for Non-Farmers

▪Buy direct from farmers (U-pick, farmers markets, farm stands, etc.).	▪Ask for permission before going onto a farmer’s property.
▪Ask for an informal farm visit.	▪Invite the farm family to meals, parties, etc.
▪Recognize that farms are businesses.	▪Help out, if needed.
▪Wave to farmers in passing.	

Figure 4. Bridge Builders for Communities

- Sponsor a farmers market, farm tour, or agricultural fair.
- Support agricultural education for youth.
- Celebrate Agriculture Day annually.
- Encourage safe and sound farm practices.
- Encourage problem-solving that satisfies interests of both parties.
- Recognize that farmland generally contributes a large share of property taxes relative to the services used.

All in This Together

For communities, farmers, and non-farmers, working through conflict involves finding common ground and shared interests. In the case of rural/urban conflict, one of the shared interests is the desire of farmers and non-farmers, new residents and long-time residents, to all enjoy life in the country. As urbanites and suburbanites continue to move to rural areas and farmers and other long-time residents continue to have more new neighbors, cultivating relationships and building bridges will be vital to working through the rural/urban conflict.

References & Additional Resources

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