

“Farmer-to-farmer advice for avoiding conflicts with neighbors and towns”

A collaborative grant project (2007-2008) of the:
State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC)
New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA)
New Jersey Farm Bureau (NJFB)
Northeast Organic Farming Association-New Jersey (NOFA-NJ)
Rutgers NJAES Cooperative Extension

Summary report for the agricultural community

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Introduction

Farming is not without its risks. The weather may be fickle. The price of inputs could rise. The price of farm products could fall. A dispute might develop with a landlord.

In New Jersey, many farmers are also familiar with the risks associated with neighbor and municipal relations. Complaints from neighbors? Disputes with municipalities? These, too, are factors that New Jersey farmers have been dealing with for some time.

New Jersey is well-known for its population density, and as the state continues to grow, farmers and non-farmers are being brought closer together. Today, as many as 40% of the state's farms are already located in areas defined by the Census as "urban" or "urbanizing." It's not surprising farmers have consistently ranked "Right to Farm" among the issues that most concern them. In the NJ Farm Bureau's Top 10 Policy Issues for 2009 – a priority listing voted on by NJ Farm Bureau delegates – Right to Farm took the top spot.

From 2007-2008, the SADC coordinated a collaborative grant project designed to collect, compile, and present farmers' advice and strategies on what they do to maintain good relations and proactively avoid Right to Farm disputes.

New Jersey is fortunate to have one of the strongest Right to Farm laws in the nation, but oftentimes the best right-to-farm protection is knowing how to prevent disputes from happening in the first place. Several farmers expressed this idea during the course of the project. While the formal Right to Farm process may protect a farmer and farm practices, the process costs time and money that could otherwise be spent on the farm. Litigation also might not resolve any underlying issues.

What are some other, more informal strategies for maintaining good relationships and reducing conflicts with neighbors and towns? This is the question we asked a number of farmers during the fall of 2007. The responses we got back were compiled and then presented to the agricultural community in 2008.

The project

The project team – the SADC, Rutgers NJAES Cooperative Extension, NJ Farm Bureau, Northeast Organic Farming Association-NJ, and the NJ Department of Agriculture – collectively interviewed 54 farmers from around the state in 2007. We then organized the ideas and quotations we had collected into an educational booklet, "Farmer-to-Farmer Advice for Avoiding Conflicts with Neighbors and Towns."

The booklet was arranged around the following main categories of farmers' advice:

- Get to know your neighbors

- Be neighborly/ Help neighbors with little things
- Use common sense with management practices to prevent conflicts
- Educate/familiarize neighbors with the farm
- Keep the farm neat and attractive
- Be accessible/talk to people when they have concerns
- Be involved in the community
- Be active in local government
- Get to know/be cordial with local officials
- Familiarize local officials with the farm
- Work with the township when you can

Beginning in 2008, we distributed the booklet widely throughout the agricultural community. This included a mailing to the state's many agricultural organizations as well as a specific distribution to County Agriculture Development Boards (CADBs) and County Boards of Agriculture (at whose meetings CADB administrators and Rutgers county agricultural agents facilitated discussions about the booklet with the members present). We also mailed copies of the booklet to the 1,619 NJ Farm Bureau members who had identified "Right to Farm" as a topic of interest on their annual Farm Bureau membership forms.

To complement these efforts, we organized a series of farmer-panel presentations for several winter agricultural conferences. These meetings, at which a panel of 2-5 farmers discussed their experiences and general risk management strategies with the farmer audience present, included the following:

- 1/26/08 – NOFA-NJ's annual winter conference
- 2/4/08 – State Agriculture Convention
- 2/6/08 – NJ Agricultural Leadership Development Program's winter seminar
- 2/29/08 – NJ Nursery and Landscape Association's South Jersey Growers Conference
- 3/5/08 – Rutgers Cooperative Extension's North Jersey Tree Fruit Meeting
- 6/26/08 – NJ Horse Council's open public meeting

As a result of our outreach and distribution efforts (the mailings, county board discussions, farmer-panel workshops, and a few other small efforts), we received 269 completed farmer-evaluation surveys in 2008. In 2009, we followed up with 131 of these farmers (those who had included contact information on their initial surveys) to see what strategies they applied. This resulted in 99 completed follow-up surveys. All the survey responses were then compiled (anonymity preserved) for reporting to the grant-making agency on what the agricultural community had learned, achieved, and applied.

For this project, we submitted a proposal to the Northeast Center for Risk Management Education, a regional entity that awards grants using USDA funds. The specific result we proposed to achieve, through project activities like the educational booklet's distribution and the farmer-panel presentations, was that a certain number of farmers would:

- 1) Improve their understanding of
 - a. The risks associated with neighbor/town relations, and
 - b. Risk management strategies for maintaining good relations;
- 2) Identify specific strategies they would apply on the farm in the coming year; and
- 3) Apply one or more of the strategies that year.

The Northeast Center awarded us a grant to conduct the project. The evaluation forms that farmers completed, first during the roll-out phase of the project in 2008 and then during a follow-up effort in 2009, showed that the targeted results were achieved.

The results

Farmers' responses on the initial evaluations showed the following:

- 89% of the respondents (240 out of 269) agreed that as a result of either attending a farmer-panel presentation or reviewing the booklet and/or discussing it, they had a better understanding of the risks and benefits associated with relationships with neighbors and towns
- 92% of the respondents (248) agreed that as a result of the project, they had a better understanding of risk management strategies for maintaining good relations
- 90% (241) identified (checked off from the list of main farmer advice categories above) at least one strategy to maintain good relations that they said they would apply on the farm in 2008
- 70% (187) took additional time to write out what they felt was the most important technique they planned to use in 2008 to build good relations and reduce risk

Farmers' responses on the follow-up surveys showed similarly positive results:

- 95% of the respondents (94 out of the 99 who completed the follow-up survey) indicated that they had applied one or more of the project's presented risk management strategies on the farm last year

Feedback from the agricultural community

Farmers also provided many additional comments on their evaluation surveys, ranging from general thoughts on the advice presented to additional strategies not mentioned in the booklet. They also provided both criticism and praise of the project itself.

One general idea several farmers expressed was that much of the advice was based on sound judgment. "It's all about being a good neighbor and using common sense in what you do," one farmer said. "I think most of it is just good common sense," another added. "You don't want to antagonize anybody, and you have to respect that others might have a

different point of view.” A third commented, “These are all common sense things I would hope most farmers already know and do.”

This last comment leads to another idea expressed in the surveys – that some farmers were already familiar with, and employing, some of the presented risk management strategies. A few of the comments representative of this idea were the following:

- “I am a fourth generation farmer. All of these strategies, we have been doing for years. All of these things are very good for new farmers and farmers who may not understand that working with your neighbors, instead of taking a hard stand, can make life a lot easier.”
- “I have been applying them already and will continue.”
- “Every smart farmer I know has already learned the lessons in the pamphlet, although I do know a couple I’ll be passing the pamphlet on to! I already know my neighbors.”
- “Most farmers already know how to stay out of conflicts with neighbors and towns. Sometimes farmers just can’t do all the more pleasant ‘nice’ things due to long hours of working and pressures on the farm, including financial reasons. But a reminder of how important these things are is not a bad idea – resolve to do better.”

As reflected in these comments, some farmers coupled the idea that “farmers may already be familiar with these strategies” with the idea that “the project and booklet would be helpful nonetheless.” In contrast, a few respondents coupled the “already know this” idea with a criticism of the project. One such comment was, “This is an unnecessary program. Most of us already have common sense to know how to deal with neighbors.”

Many farmers also answered a question from the initial evaluation survey that gave them the opportunity to write out what they felt was the most important technique they planned to use in 2008 to build good relations and reduce risk. We compiled all the responses to this question and then assigned them to the appropriate farmer-advice categories used in the booklet. This exercise revealed that the top three techniques farmers said they would apply in 2008 were the following:

- 1) Use common sense with management practices to prevent conflicts
- 2) Get to know neighbors
- 3) Educate/familiarize neighbors with the farm

There were also some responses to this question that did not fit into any of the general categories. Instead, they could be summarized as the following: “Reduce conflicts by minimizing contact and being less visible.” A few of these responses were:

- “Never offer too much information”
- “Hide what you do”
- “Try to be proactive and invisible”
- “Plant pine trees as a hedgerow”

- “Limit access to the farm property”

These comments are interesting because they describe techniques that are in some ways the opposite of other advice that farmers had given. Rather than educating people about the farm and farm practices, the advice was to keep a low profile and minimize one’s interaction with others. Another way to describe it is how one farmer put it, echoing an old proverb: “Good fences make good neighbors.” This strategy did not appear in the publication, but it certainly is valid. A few farmers also mentioned it during the initial interviews, and it was highlighted during one of the farmer-panels. Overall, this type of response indicates how different strategies may work better, or be more appropriate, for different people, situations, and locations.

In terms of criticisms, a few people felt the booklet was too long or repetitive. A few others thought there should have been more information on the Right to Farm Act. One comment that touched on both of these topics was the following: “The brochure is too long and does not have any facts (what is the Right to Farm law?) How many times did you say ‘be a good neighbor’? (about 3000!) Bulletize, reduce redundancy, and add a section on what to do if there is a conflict.”

The purpose the booklet was not to explain the Right to Farm Act, but rather to highlight some informal and proactive strategies, outside of Right to Farm, that farmers have found helpful for preventing and minimizing disputes. Nonetheless, this comment touches on an idea that some farmers had expressed during the county agriculture board and farmer-panel workshop discussions – that additional Right to Farm outreach would be beneficial, particularly with towns that may not understand the mechanics of Right to Farm.

Some farmers also commented in their surveys that the responsibility for maintaining good relationships falls on more than just the farmers. Neighbors and municipal officials have to do their part, too. While the booklet acknowledges this idea and notes that its focus is on the things that farmers can do, a few farmers felt like a heavier burden was placed on them. “The onus can’t just be on the farmer,” one person said. Another farmer remarked, “Relations are shared, so both sides of the community need to do their part. We need to respect neighbors, and they need to respect us.” A third person added, “What about all these developments which are adjacent to existing farms, and once in, they complain about the farms and farm practices? Maybe they need a publication, too.”

This last suggestion – creating a companion booklet for neighbors to help them understand and appreciate agriculture – was mentioned by a few farmers. “Have something for people moving into the area, to explain to them what agriculture and farming is about,” one person said, “because there’s a lot more non-farmers than farmers.” Such “neighbor” or “learn more about agriculture” booklets have been done in other states, and New Jersey’s residents and farmers might benefit from creating one here, too.

A few farmers also noted and asked why the booklet did not include quotes from farmers in their counties. “How come no Bergen County responses?” one farmer commented.

The agricultural agent in Bergen, who had interviewed three farmers for the project, added that there was disappointment that no local responses had been used. The county's farmers are "every bit as articulate as the others surveyed," he wrote, adding that Bergen's farmers have long been good at finding tactful solutions.

The quotes selected for the booklet were based on 54 farmer interviews that provided a huge amount of good quotes from all over the state. Many farmers expressed similar ideas, strategies, and worthwhile responses, so the selection process was often difficult. In the end, we tried to use the quotes that not only captured the spirit of each idea best, but also fit best when read in context with the other comments. The intent was to have each section flow well as a whole, as if telling a story.

Where there was criticism, there was also praise. A selection of farmers' positive comments included the following:

- "Very good. Advice in the booklet is helpful."
- "It was a good publication and is good to keep in the forefront of our minds because we do need to be good neighbors."
- "I think this booklet will be helpful. We all agree that farms must operate early, late, when the weather is good, etc. What this booklet makes clear is that farmers are part of the community that surrounds them. The thinking that you can do anything you like on your land without considering your neighbors always leads to conflict."
- "Most of these we already do on our farm, but it's good to remember how to communicate during those busy times of year, especially with new neighbors."
- "Thank you for your efforts."

On their follow-up surveys, several farmers also gave specific examples of how applying some of the risk management strategies in the past year had been beneficial. Some of these comments were:

- "I had a new neighbor in back, and I told him what we were going to do, and he was appreciative."
- "We started a fairly large composting program (horse manure and egg shells), and since the egg shells can develop a smell if left out, we set it up so the prevailing winds would blow any odor towards the woods. We only had one complaint because the winds changed one time."
- "We had some complaints and questions this year about our irrigation machine near the road. We had to educate them about that. Most people are fine once you explain it to them and they understand. It helps a great deal to take the time to explain it to them and not fly off the handle."
- "We're the custodian of some of the town's open space land and have a good working relationship with the town. Keeping in contact with the powers that be really helps in terms of knowing what's coming down that could affect you."
- "We did some construction in the fields, clearing out apple trees, and we got some complaints about the appearance so we tried to accommodate the neighbors – we

went out of the way to improve the visual looks, and they were appreciative of that.”

The above comments reiterate that being proactive to prevent disputes, and working with people to defuse conflicts when they do arise, can help minimize risks and reduce impacts to the farm. As several farmers noted, the Right to Farm Act is a good, but not necessarily the only or always the best, tool for preventing and resolving disputes with neighbors and towns. Employing other strategies and working to maintain good relationships are just as important. “Remember that the RTF law doesn’t allow you to make your neighbors’ lives unbearable,” one farmer said. “It protects you but doesn’t allow you to abuse the neighbors. Work together to solve complaints.” Another farmer added, “It’s all about common sense. You may own the farm but not the neighborhood.”

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More information

For more information on the project, or for a copy of the educational booklet, please contact David Kimmel at the SADC at (609) 984-2504, or visit the SADC’s website at www.nj.gov/agriculture/sadc/publications/farmeradvicebrochure.html.

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