

FINDING THE COMMON GROUND

Good Neighbor Relations

Advice and Tips from Farmers



PENNSTATE



College of Agricultural Sciences
Agricultural Research and Cooperative Extension

Good Neighbor Relations

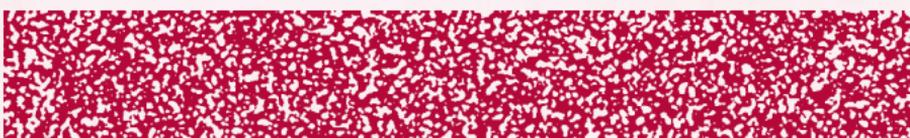


Land development throughout Pennsylvania increasingly is bringing residential development and nonfarmers into agricultural areas. Many of these new residents have little previous exposure to agriculture and farming. They may have misconceptions about what activities occur on farms and in rural areas.

This fundamental change in rural Pennsylvania has important implications for how you farm. Nonfarming neighbors may complain about the noise or odors from your farm, or about agricultural practices such as pesticide, herbicide, or fertilizer application, simply because they do not understand why these farm activities are necessary. In addition, many residents are concerned about environmental quality and the possible ways that farming could affect the water they drink or water used for fishing or other recreational purposes.

Pennsylvania's "Right to Farm" law provides farmers with some legal protection from nuisance lawsuits, but because of the costs involved, no one really wins a legal battle. It is much easier and cheaper simply to prevent problems from escalating into such conflict in the first place. Building a trusting relationship with your neighbors makes it easier to discuss problems when they arise.

There are things you can do to help build better relationships with your neighbors and help minimize conflicts with them. This publication contains advice and tips from 36 farmers on how to peacefully coexist or simply develop better relationships with nonfarming neighbors. The advice does not mean that you or other farmers should be wholly responsible for peace in your community. There are steps that you can take, however, that may help build such harmony. Nine "rules of thumb" are provided in this publication.



Advice and Tips from Farmers

“Get to Know Your Neighbors”—Dairy Farmer, Bucks County

Getting to know your neighbors is the most important and simplest action you can take to help minimize conflicts. When you know your neighbors, it is easier to talk to them when problems occur and to keep problems from escalating into blame, misunderstandings, hard feelings, or intense community conflict. Knowing your neighbors makes it more likely that when they have a concern about your farm operation (such as noise or odor), they will call you directly to work it out instead of reporting you to the township or a government agency. It also means that when you have a complaint about a neighbor, such as trespassing or littering, that they will be more open to discussing it with you.

“If you become friends with somebody, you can withstand more problems than if you never talk to them.”—*Dairy farmer, Lebanon County*

“You just have to be friendly. Don’t come across as a mean, business-oriented person.”—*Fruit farmer, Adams County*

“Be friendly. Remember you have to live around them for a long time.”—*Dairy farmer, Adams County*

“Talk to them. Stress that we’re both here and we should try to get along as best we can.”—*Dairy farmer, Franklin County*

“You’ve got to work with them; you’ve got to look at their side of the view.”—*Dairy farmer, Lebanon County*

“Get to know neighbors enough to communicate with them.”—*Dairy farmer, Bucks County*

“Try to know neighbors before conflicts arise.”
—*Dairy farmer, Franklin County*

“Wave as you drive by.”—*Hog farmer, Franklin County*

“Talk to Your Neighbors” – Fruit Farmer, Bucks County

According to many of the farmers, talking with your neighbors and letting them know what you are doing is very important. Good communication builds trust and allows you to discuss problems with your neighbors in a peaceful and respectful way. It also helps neighbors learn that you are approachable and interested in their concerns. If a neighbor does have a complaint about your farm, it is better that they feel comfortable enough to approach you directly instead of your hearing of it secondhand.

“Talk to them (even though that takes time).”

—*Livestock farmer, Montgomery County*

“Tell them what you’re doing. Explaining what’s going on instead of just doing it can avoid a lot of grief.”—*Livestock farmer, Lebanon County*

“Let them know you’re not just in business to make money and bad odors.”—*Dairy farmer, Franklin County*

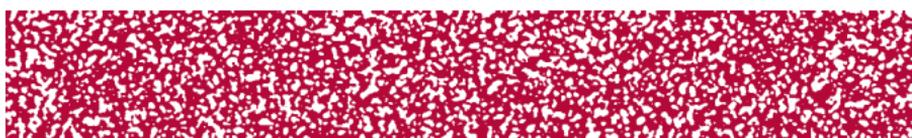
“We compiled a list of neighbors’ phone numbers so we can call them easily.”—*Fruit farmer, Adams County*

“Call and alert neighbors not to hang out laundry on days you spread manure.”—*Dairy farmer, Franklin County*

“Ask neighbors if they have picnics coming up, or other special events that would be disrupted if you spread manure or spray.”—*Dairy farmer, Adams County*

“Be reasonable with neighbors. Be as diplomatic as possible.”—*Vegetable farmer, Bucks County*

“My way has been inclusive, not exclusive. It’s been a priority item with us.”—*Fruit farmer, Adams County*



“Be a Good Neighbor Yourself, That’s the Important Thing” – Dairy Farmer, Montgomery County

If you expect your neighbors to be good neighbors, you must also be a good neighbor to them. Being neighborly means being friendly to your neighbors, helping them when needed, and being willing to accommodate them. As one farmer said, “it’s the small things that matter” when establishing and maintaining good relations with neighbors (dairy farmer, Adams County).

“Just treat people the way you want to be treated.”
—*Fruit farmer, Adams County*

“I try to be a good neighbor and help anybody close by when they need it.” —*Dairy farmer, Bucks County*

“You’ve got to be a nice guy.” —*Dairy farmer, Montgomery County*

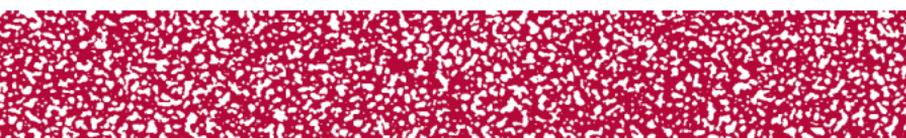
“Don’t take the attitude ‘we were here first.’ They’ll be here after us probably. You might be right and deserve some grandfathering, but that’s just not the way it’s going to be.” —*Field crop farmer, Lehigh County*

“We allow trespassing, horse riding, and hunting on our property. We also give maps of our property lines to hunters. We do not allow 3- or 4-wheelers or swimming or fishing due to liability.” —*Fruit farmer, Adams County*

“I let our neighbors trespass, bike, and ride horses (but not hunt).” —*Fruit farmer, Adams County*

“Our neighbors appreciated our giving work to their kids. We just got cookies and a card from them, saying thanks for making their boy welcome.”
—*Dairy farmer, Lebanon County*

“I put high-tensile fence up before neighbors move in so boundaries are clear from the start.” —*Dairy farmer, Franklin County*



“Just Use Common Sense” – Dairy Farmer, Bucks County

Simply using common sense can make a big difference in minimizing conflicts with neighbors. The timeliness of farming means that sometimes you do not have much choice about when you plow, spray, or harvest. Often, however, you do have some control over when you do farm tasks. Spreading manure on holiday weekends or a day when you know a neighbor is planning a picnic, for example, will do little to build community harmony.

“Try to appreciate if they are having a picnic or something. Don’t spray or plow near them. Some things can be put off for a day.” – *Fruit farmer, Bucks County*

“We try to haul manure in a short period of time.”
– *Dairy farmer, Franklin County*

“Be careful of traffic if possible. Don’t go through rush hour.” – *Dairy farmer, Montgomery County*

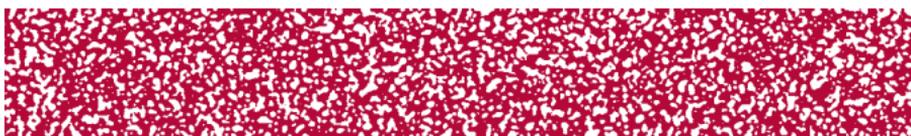
“Clean up messes you make. For example, put stone on a muddy driveway after hauling hay out.”
– *Dairy farmer, Adams County*

“Shovel manure off roads.” – *Dairy farmer, Lebanon County*

“Try to spray in the early morning or in the evening when people are not around so much.”
– *Vegetable farmer, Montgomery County*

“Don’t spray when the wind blows the wrong way.” – *Fruit farmer, Adams County*

“Don’t make noise at night.” – *Vegetable farmer, Lehigh County*



“A Little Gesture of Friendliness Goes a Long Way”—Dairy Farmer, Bucks County

Doing occasional favors for neighbors can help build positive relationships. These favors need not be expensive or time-consuming because they primarily serve as tokens of friendship and acceptance.

“We have what we call our Neighbor Relations Day. We just help them out with odd tasks they need help with.”—*Dairy farmer, Franklin County*

“Help out neighbors when possible, with machinery they don’t have.”—*Dairy farmer, Franklin County*

“You could plow your neighbors’ driveway. Bring them a bushel of apples, for example. Show you’re willing to share.”—*Fruit farmer, Adams County*

“Bring a little of your product to neighbors.”
—*Dairy farmer, Lebanon County*

“Help neighbors with small tasks, such as posthole digging.”—*Dairy farmer, Bucks County*

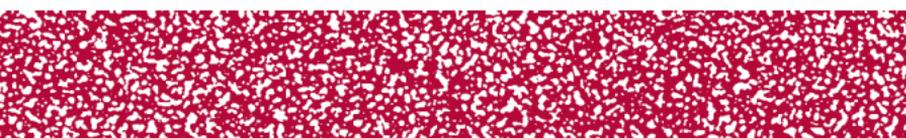
“Give manure to people for mulch.”—*Dairy farmer, Montgomery County*

“In the summer, we host a neighborhood picnic (covered dish) for farming and nonfarming neighbors.”—*Dairy farmer, Adams County*

“At Christmas we take trees around to our neighbors.”—*Dairy farmer, Adams County*

“We plant a row of sweet corn along our property line for our neighbors.”—*Dairy farmer, Northumberland County*

“Plant a small patch of pumpkins next to the neighbors for them to have.”—*Potato farmer, Berks County*



“Make Your Farm Attractive” – Dairy Farmer, Franklin County

The appearance of your farm plays an important role in determining what neighbors and others think about you and your farm operation. Nonfarmers too easily can believe the farm’s appearance is a reflection of the farmer’s professionalism, competence, and concern about controlling problems. A farm that is known as a neighborhood eyesore will have less goodwill in the community and get less public sympathy if problems arise.

“Keep things looking nice (people smell with their eyes).” –*Livestock farmer, Montgomery County*

“Nobody wants to live near a dump.” –*Dairy farmer, Lebanon County*

“Make it be a place that people would want to buy food from.” –*Dairy farmer, Franklin County*

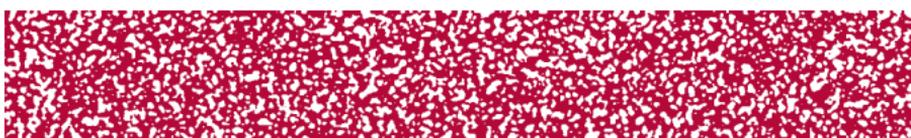
“Care enough to put forth some effort to keep things cleaned up. It’s so easy to let those things go.”
–*Dairy farmer, Lebanon County*

“Keep the lawn mowed. Don’t farm right up to the road.” –*Livestock farmer, Lebanon County*

“We have a grass buffer between our potatoes and the property line.” –*Field crop farmer, Lehigh County*

“We planted buffer strips along our property lines: one row pine, one row hybrid poplar.” –*Fruit farmer, Adams County*

“We decided to pasture our cows more often after we discovered that our neighbors like to see our cows. If people want to see cows, let them see cows.” –*Dairy farmer, Franklin County*



“Invite Neighbors Over the Fence” – Fruit Farmer, Adams County

Neighbors can complain about things they do not understand. Few people have direct experience with agriculture anymore. It is not surprising then that many nonfarming neighbors have little knowledge about what happens on farms. Showing neighbors what you do on your farm and why those activities are necessary can help them realize that you are not out plowing in the middle of the night simply to annoy them.

“Let people know what you’re doing on the farm. Invite them into the farm. Participate in agriculture education activities.” – *Dairy farmer, Chester County*

“Let people come to your farm and show them what you’re doing. Let their kids look at the cows. Invite a couple of people over to help you milk. Explain why you have to do things like run machinery late at night.” – *Dairy farmer, Montgomery County*

“We have an open-gate farm tour one Sunday in the fall.” – *Field crop farmer, Lehigh County*

“Let school children visit and watch milking. Let them feed calves and give them cookies and milk. I did this and got a book back with letters from each of the 53 second-graders saying what they liked about the visit.” – *Dairy farmer, Adams County*

“Explain the need for some practices. Help them understand that some noises and smells that are not to their liking are necessary.” – *Vegetable farmer, Bucks County*

“If neighbors know the reasons why you do things, it helps a lot. If farmers don’t explain why they do things, then we’re partly to blame when conflicts arise.” – *Dairy farmer, Franklin County*

“Help neighbors realize that I’m not here to (anger you), I’m here to make a living.” – *Dairy farmer, Bucks County*

“You Don’t Solve Anything by Being Hard or Arrogant” – Fruit Farmer, Adams County

How you respond to complaints or concerns expressed by neighbors often will determine whether the issue grows into anger, resentment, and major conflict. Farmers who have already established friendly relationships with their neighbors will find it easier to avoid such conflict. Respond promptly and genuinely to complaints by communicating directly with your neighbors.

“If a concern or complaint arises, be honest. Deal with it openly and immediately.” – *Field crop farmer, Adams County*

“Thank them for letting you know if they smell it, and to let you know about changes in the smell as you try different things to correct the problem.”
– *Dairy farmer, Franklin County*

“Go directly to neighbors if there’s a problem, not through third parties.” – *Fruit farmer, Bucks County*

“You’ve got to work with them. You’ve got to look at their side of the view.” – *Dairy farmer, Lebanon County*

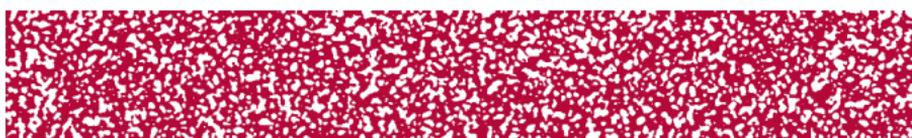
“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” – *Dairy farmer, Franklin County*

“Don’t try to cultivate animosity.” – *Vegetable farmer, Bucks County*

“Don’t have an attitude problem.” – *Dairy farmer, Franklin County*

“Say ‘I’m sorry, and I’ll try not to do it again.’ That defuses it.” – *Dairy farmer, Franklin County*

“Sometimes you’ve got to bite your tongue and do what’s right for the long-term view of your business.” – *Fruit farmer, Adams County*



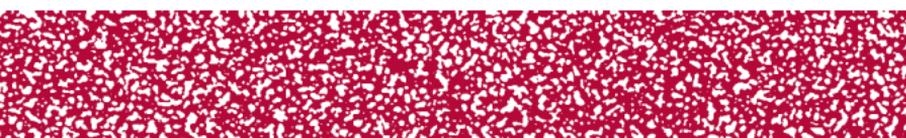
“Be Active in the Community” – Dairy Farmer, Montgomery County

Actions you take on your farm are important, but do not forget that becoming involved in community-level activities also can improve farm-nonfarm relationships. The agricultural community can take steps to better educate the public about farming and farmers’ needs. Encourage your local agricultural organizations to become involved in educational activities and outreach programs for nonfarmers, and support those efforts.

“Serve on agriculture promotional committees and local activities.” –*Dairy farmer, Franklin County*

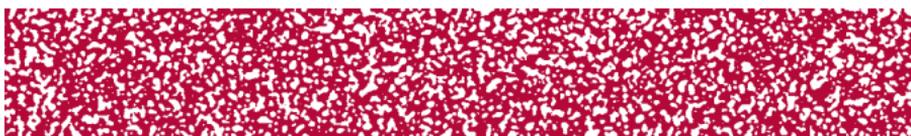
“Get involved with your township government, such as the planning or rezoning boards. Go to meetings and keep them informed on the farm perspective, which may be foreign to them.” –*Dairy farmer, Montgomery County*

“Volunteer to serve on the ag committee of your local Chamber of Commerce, Ag 2000, or advisory board of your local bank.” –*Dairy farmer, Franklin County*



Summing Up

Developing and improving your relationship with your neighbors, especially if some of them are new to your community, can be one of the most important activities you do to help your farm survive in a changing environment. Helping neighbors understand the activities on your farm and fostering goodwill can be beneficial to all; neighbors may understand your needs better and have more respect for you and your concerns. Your new neighbors also may help you find ways to avoid needless conflicts with them concerning your farm activities. You may discover that you have more in common with your neighbors than you thought.

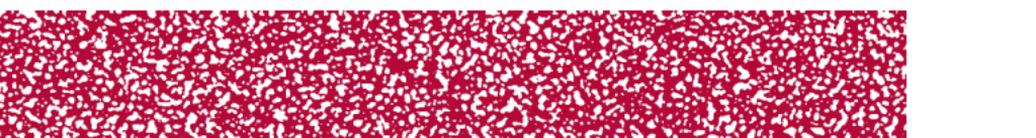


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What's Your Advice?

If you do something special on your farm to help build or maintain better relations with your neighbors, we want to hear about it so we can share it with others. Complete the enclosed tear-off sheet, or send your suggestions on "Good Neighbor Relations" to:

Good Neighbor Relations

c/o Tim Kelsey

The Pennsylvania State University

105 Armsby Building

University Park, PA 16802

All suggestions and comments will be treated confidentially.



Tear-off sheet

Name (optional)

Address (optional)

City/State/Zip (optional)

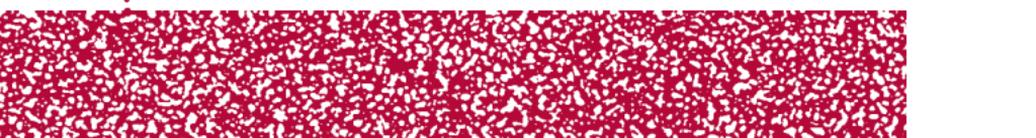
County

Farm type

1. Which “Good Neighbor Relations” idea have you tried? How well did it work?

2. What other special action or activity do you do to help build or maintain better relations with your neighbors? How well has it worked?

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