

It Takes a Community to Grow a Farm

By Mary Peabody

Farms are an important component of rural economies. They provide food and fiber, consume other local goods and services, protect open space and attract tourists.

However as farms expand in size and as more non-farmers move to the countryside, conflict between farmers and their neighbors is also going to increase. In view of these trends, farmers cannot afford to ignore the impacts of their operations on others in their communities. Change is inevitable, and rather than resist it, farmers need to make it work to their advantage. But farmers should not be alone in this. Their neighbors and the community at large also share the responsibility for good relations.

The best approach for creating community harmony is one which brings farmers and neighbors together, promotes understanding, and minimizes conflict. Successful communities learn how to manage negative impacts and take advantage of the many positive contributions of agriculture to the rural landscape, the economy, and society as a whole.

It is important to understand the underlying causes of farm-related land-use conflict. Common complaints that rural residents often have against farmers include: odor

from manure or chemicals; increased noise, dust, insects; large, slow-moving equipment on roads; concerns about surface or ground water pollution; and animal welfare. As farms adopt more high-tech production strategies they often become targets for criticism.

The flip side of the coin is that farmers also have complaints about their neighbors and the general public. Most farmers' complaints relate to trespassing, vandalism, and municipal ordinances that result in increased operating expenses or unrealistic compliance requirements. Problems with unwelcome hunters, hikers, or other people looking for recreational opportunities create frustration. Theft or destruction of property may also be a serious problem for farmers near urban development.

Understanding the potential sources of conflict is not enough to prevent these clashes from happening. Farmers, their neighbors, and the community all have a role to play in maintaining good relationships.

For example, farmers can implement community-friendly farm management practices. This doesn't necessarily mean more work or more expense. It might be as simple as notifying your neighbors of your work plans so that they can plan accordingly. If farmers want community support they have to be willing to get involved in the communi-

ty. Anticipate the concerns of others and be ready with explanations. Be advocates for farming by educating neighbors and community residents about your seasonal work demands. You'd be surprised at how little non-farmers know about your work.

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Non-farm neighbors can help support the farms in their communities by buying direct from the farmer at U-pick operations, farm stands, and farmers markets. Remember that farms are businesses, and expect some seasonal disruptions. If you're planning a special event, let the farmers know far in advance and work with them to accommodate your needs.

For example, it is perfectly reasonable to expect that you could hold an outdoor wedding in your garden and not have the farmer mowing hay a few feet away but only if you communicate your needs well in advance. Always ask permission before

going on a farmer's property and teach your children and guests to do the same.

Communities can choose to be farmer-friendly in any number of ways. Sponsor farmers' markets and festivals which promote opportunities for community interaction. Host public meetings on the future of agriculture in the community and invite farmers and landowners to talk about what they do and why they do it. Recognize that farms often contribute a disproportionately large share of local property taxes relative to the services they receive. Be sensitive to any proposed ordinances which might affect farming by allowing adequate time to hear from all affected parties. Finally, when farm-related land-use concerns arise, community leaders should encourage problem solving that satisfies the interests of both parties.

If rural communities are going to survive and thrive, agriculture needs more than ever to be more fully integrated into the community. Through mutual understanding and consideration, farmers and their neighbors can help make this possible.

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COWS AND CROPS

Homestead Fields: Dairy Changes Ownership & Style

Ed and Ann Walldroff bought the family's dairy after being in farming for 20 years with Ed's parents, five brothers and a brother-in-law. Upon taking over ownership, the Walldroffs made several changes, which included converting to grazing.

By Peggy Murray

Homestead Fields, as Ed and Anne Walldroff call their dairy, has been in the Walldroff family for more than 100 years, making Ed the fifth generation to work this farm. During the 1970s, Ed's parents ran a 200-cow dairy, a 1,500-acre crop operation and a farm equipment business with Ed, his five brothers and a brother-in-law.

Each family member had specific responsibilities, with Ed managing the dairy. After 20 years of doing business together, the family decided to sell the dairy, move the equipment business to Watertown and get out of the cash-crop business.

There were some conflicts along the way, but for the most part the family was able to separate business from family. The Walldroff family always held Monday night business meetings to discuss all parts of the business. Family members were able to agree to the terms of the sale without involving a third party.

With his knowledge of the dairy, Ed felt it could be profitable. He knew there was still a future in dairying, but the Walldroff dairy could only support one family. With that knowledge, the couple decided to buy the dairy from the other family members and exit the family's equipment business in 1995.

MECHANICS, MANAGEMENT & RESOURCES

Today, the Walldroffs milk 125 cows and have approximately 400 acres, with 375 tillable. The Walldroffs house their Holsteins, Jerseys and crossbreds in a freestall barn and milk in a double-seven swing (highline) parlor.

Once they took over as sole proprietors of the dairy, the Walldroffs converted to grazing. The Walldroffs made a conscious decision to give up operations that generated the least amount of profit, such as raising heifers and growing crops, to concentrate on their dairy herd.

Instead of doing their own cropping, the couple leases land to Ed's brother Larry and buys back the forages. The Walldroffs feed a mix of haylage and high moisture corn, which they buy in the fall and store in upright, sealed silos. Ed points out that his total cost of buying forages is less than what a 125-cow dairy usually spends on machinery and its repair and maintenance, as shown in the Cornell Dairy Farm Business Summary.

Larry also has use of the dairy manure and Ed does not have to pay to have it spread. A contract grower raises the Walldroffs' heifers beginning at approximately four to five months of age.

The herd maintains 60 pounds of milk per cow all year. Costs are much lower during summer months when the herd is grazed. Though he could make more milk with conventional dairying, Ed, who carefully tracks his costs, feels his cows are healthier and his costs are lower with grazing.

Homestead Fields employs one full-time person. Ed handles the day-to-day operations of the dairy, and Anne works off the farm. They own all the assets together as

sole proprietors. Upon making the decision to buy the dairy, the Walldroffs first had to get financing. Based on Ed's 20 years of experience, they got a loan from the Farm Service Agency through its Beginning Farming Program. Charles Colbert of the Farm Service Agency in Canton was also instrumental in securing that loan.

At that point, the couple had to ensure that the business cash flowed.

Though they didn't do a complete financial analysis to determine the dairy's viability, Ed, a business graduate of Canton Agricultural Technical College with accounting savvy, knew the business' inputs, outputs and costs.

For the first three years of ownership, the Walldroffs put every dollar back into the business to help renovate the barn. Ed created a drive-through feed alley and a completely automated AO Smith Harvester System specifically for haylage and high moisture corn. He can feed 120 cows in 20 minutes and never leave the barn.

He bought a new bulk tank and put in manure storage. Because Ed culled heavily, he also had to buy replacement heifers.

In the beginning, the couple was 100% leveraged. By the end of the fourth year, the Walldroffs could see an improvement in cash flow.

In making these changes, the Walldroffs used many resources including Sonny Golden from Golden Associates, who



Homestead Fields has been a family farm for more than 100 years. The grazing operation has 125 cows milking.

helped them implement their rotational grazing program. An attorney familiar with dairy operations reviewed the business transfer. Ed often attends Cornell Cooperative Extension workshops and reads many farm publications. He tracks the business' finances with One Write Plus accounting program.

THE FUTURE

Ed, who is happy with how he runs the dairy, plans to keep the business at its current size. The Walldroffs feel they have the right resources – land, buildings and labor – to milk the number of cows they currently do. Ed feels his most valuable resource is his abundant supply of natural spring water. There is room to become more efficient, Ed said, but he isn't interested in growing his business.

The couple's goal is to make \$1 more per cwt. than the Boston Blend price. Ed's goal is to make 60 pounds of high component milk per cow and do it as cheaply as possible. The Walldroffs hope to be debt free in five years, expecting the business to take

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