

Poultry Farming and Neighbors: The Little Things Are Important



Poultry is the largest agricultural commodity in Mississippi and has ranked number one in farm-gate value for the past 13 years. More than 10 percent of the poultry supply in the nation is the result of Mississippi production. The state has approximately 2,000 poultry growers. However, not all these growers have understanding neighbors.

Poultry production can create several potential nuisances, including noise, dust, flies, and odors. Today, the demographics of rural areas are changing rapidly and becoming more urbanized. **Public awareness of the environment and pollution** has heightened as the geographic consolidation of agricultural industries creates a concentration of agricultural wastes, and urban growth continues to spill over into the nation's farmland (Ritz, 2010). In addition, few people outside the agricultural community understand the commercial farming practices employed by the poultry industry.

Many people that leave the city hoping to enjoy their idea of the "country lifestyle" are unaware of common farming practices today and have little patience for them. As a result, conflicts may arise between poultry growers and neighbors. Neighbors may think the farm next door is destroying the "pastoral" lifestyle they moved to the country for. Farmers may conclude that their new neighbors have a serious lack of knowledge as to where their food comes from and what it takes to put supper on the table.

Left unchecked, these differences may eventually lead to legal action where, in most cases, only the lawyers come out winners. Time and money are wasted, stress takes a mental and physical toll on all the parties involved, and relationships are destroyed. In some situations, farmers may find it difficult to expand or even continue in operation (Cunningham, 2012).

There are a few simple ways to prevent the situation from getting out of hand. **Open communication and good will** are important keys to avoiding conflicts. If you are a poultry grower, it's important to know who your neighbors are. Make it a point to visit with them on occasion, keeping in mind adequate biosecurity practices, of course. By visiting your neighbors and keeping communication lines open, it's more likely they will come to you if an issue arises instead of turning you in over a complaint.

Recognize the fact that operating a poultry farm comes with a number of challenges in addition to day-to-day farm management requirements. Often, people "smell" with their eyes instead of their noses. Running a clean, neat, well-managed farm is one of the best ways to lessen complaints about animal production facilities. In most cases, people will be more tolerant of dust and odor from a well-managed operation than from an untidy one. Of course, extra effort is required to keep the grass mowed on a regular basis and maintain a well-groomed operation, but it will likely be worth it from a public relations standpoint.

Visit with neighbors when you have something upcoming that may affect them, such as spreading litter or a nighttime catch with live haul trucks coming and going all night. They need to personally hear from you accurate information about what's going on instead of getting secondhand information that may or may not be correct or, worse yet, being surprised by your actions with no warning at all.

Neighbors may also be your customers because they likely go to the store and buy the very product you are producing. **Farming is a business and every business needs happy customers.** A few common sense practices may help keep your customers happy. If neighbors are also gardeners, a little free chicken litter for their garden is often a welcome gesture. It may seem like a small token but it goes a long way in terms of promoting good will and friendship. Smoothing a neighbor's driveway with your tractor and blade or front-end loader takes little time but will be much appreciated.

If a neighbor does have a complaint, address it quickly and tactfully. Be sympathetic and realize that sometimes, for the sake of the farm, it may be best just to take your medicine, apologize, and offer to try to do better in the future. Hopefully, this will defuse the situation and perhaps prevent possible legal action.

In some situations, **out of sight is out of mind.** It may be worth considering screening an operation from public view. Vegetative environmental buffers or windbreaks are an old technology that may hold benefits for today's tunnel-ventilated poultry houses (Tabler and Liang, 2008). Solid-wall poultry house construction now makes it feasible

to have trees alongside poultry houses without worrying about disrupting airflow patterns. Minimizing visibility will draw attention away from the farm as a potential source of dust, flies, odors, or other possible nuisances.

Spreading litter is always a delicate issue because it generates both dust and odor for a while. Plan carefully when and where you will spread litter. Check the wind direction and speed. Is there rain in the forecast for the immediate future? Spread during the hot part of the day (when most people are not at home) so that the sun can help further dry the material and reduce odor. Do not spread very early in the morning or late evening when humidity is high and the air is heavy. These conditions hold odor near the ground and increase the likelihood that someone will be affected and complain. Give yourself enough distance when spreading that you do not sling chunks of caked litter across roads or highways or onto neighbors' yards.

Mortality disposal is another area with high potential to generate numerous complaints. Properly dispose of dead birds immediately after removing them from the chicken house. Do not throw dead birds outside the chicken house door for the neighbor's dogs to drag away. If you have an incinerator, use a fast, hot burn to dispose of carcasses quickly. A slow burn allows the carcass to smolder, which will generate an odor likely to draw complaints. Use the afterburner (which re-burns the smoke) if your incinerator has one. This will remove many of the particles in the smoke that actually generate the odor.

If possible, burn the carcasses during the day, not early morning or evening when the air is heavy and odor stays close to the ground. If you have a composter, cover carcasses with sufficient litter to prevent vectors (opossums, raccoons, skunks, dogs, etc.) from uncovering and dragging them away. Also, use a probe thermometer to check the compost temperature on a regular basis. Temperature should be in the 120°F range as the bin is filling and may reach 130 to 150°F after the bin is filled. Once the temperature has peaked and fallen back to the

120°F range again (this usually takes 2 to 3 weeks), the material is ready to turn for further decomposition.

Education is key for both farm and nonfarm populations. Farmers are busy with their work and often fail to realize that most people are so far removed from agriculture today that they do not understand what it takes to put food on the table. Because they do not understand the demands of farming, people are often intolerant and unwilling to accept the occasional noise, odor, dust, and so forth that farming practices generate.

The agricultural community can take steps to better educate the public about farming and the needs of farmers. Local agricultural organizations can become involved with educational efforts and **outreach programs** for non-farmers.

Farmers can also help tell their own story. Many communities have **agricultural committees** associated with the local Chamber of Commerce. Volunteer for these or other agricultural promotion events at the local level. Many banks in rural areas have **agricultural advisory boards** that offer another opportunity to improve farm–nonfarm relationships.

While these commitments take time away from the farm, the payback can be a public that is better informed, more understanding, and, therefore, perhaps more willing to accept the occasional nuisances associated with agricultural production.

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By **Tom Tabler**, PhD, Extension Professor, Poultry Science; **Jessica Wells**, Extension Instructor, Poultry Science; and **Wei Zhai**, PhD, Assistant Professor, Poultry Science.



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