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12.0 COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Society's awareness of environmental, food safety and animal welfare issues means positive community relations are more vital than ever. Farmers need to communicate with their neighbours to build 'social capital,' which they can draw upon like a bank account when problems arise. Some neighbours may have less experience with agriculture operations or agriculture in general even though they live in an agricultural community. It is essential to get to know neighbours and inform them of farm practices they might not understand and may question. Being a good neighbour, having a public relations program for the farm and contributing to the community are good ways to build social capital.

To reduce the risk of conflict, communication with neighbours must be open, honest and thorough. This kind of communication is essential to lessen the impact livestock operations have on neighbours and to understand the concerns of neighbours. A complete understanding of community issues is an asset. Producers are in a better position if they are able to answer questions and concerns from neighbours, and if they have a complete understanding of the issues. Having the skills necessary to deal with differences of opinion can be the difference between resolving or prolonging the conflict. These skills include good communication, clarification, negotiation and facilitation.

12.1 Building Community Partnerships

Taking the time to establish relationships is challenging; however, it can result in fewer problems. When producers know their neighbours, it's easier to prevent conflicts. It also makes it easier to resolve conflicts when they do occur.

Community activities

A good way to improve relationships is through participation in community activities. Volunteering for a community group or joining a service club builds bridges between neighbours and creates a stronger sense of community.

Farm promotion

There are many activities that can promote the benefits of farming operations. Hosting a community picnic, baseball game or occasional open house will generate a better understanding of farms as businesses and may also help create new business relationships. Take the opportunity to promote examples of responsible management. These types of activities foster friendships and generate a better understanding of farm and ranch routines for people from other types of operations or those with no background in agriculture.

12.2 Conflict in Agriculture

In recent years, the number and intensity of conflicts facing farmers has risen sharply. Debated issues encompass a variety of environmental, political, economic and social issues. Public concern for human health and the environment has risen, as have inquiries into the agri-food industry and its practices.

A 1998 survey of Canadian farm organizations identified conflict arising from farm practices as one of the leading threats to the agriculture industry's future competitiveness. A study commissioned by the Canadian Farm Business Management Council (CFBMC) flagged issues management as one of the industry's top five priorities.



12.2.1 Sources of conflict

The biggest concern neighbours have about livestock production is that it will disrupt their quality of life. Producers can lessen their anxiety by exercising caution, consideration and common sense. While manure odour, animal and machinery noise, and other common agricultural practices may not be issues to the farming community, others may find these practices intrusive.

The following issues can be key sources of conflict for cow/calf producers:

- Manure odour. A common complaint concerns odour from the spreading of manure. Sound manure management is a necessity.
- Ground and surface water contamination. Depending on the topography of the land, the permeability of the soil and the quantity of manure, water contamination can be an issue. Proper placement of both watering and wintering sites can alleviate this concern.
- Riparian areas. These green zones are recognized as critical to water quality. Proper management can improve water quality and quantity, and increase forage production.
- Nuisance concerns related to the storage and handling of dead animals. Proper storage and disposal of carcasses is essential to minimize odours, flies and the transmission of disease to other animals. Carcasses should be disposed of or stored appropriately.
- Noise. Many rural areas have more non-agricultural landowners than ever before, and to them, some agricultural practices may seem foreign and offensive. When conducting noise-generating practices, such as cattle loading or doing field work at night, be courteous and let neighbours know what will be done and when. Being considerate prevents surprises and hard feelings.

12.2.2 Dealing with conflict

Sometimes conflict is unavoidable; however, it is important to resolve the conflict to the satisfaction of all parties.

To deal with conflict effectively:

- Take the matter seriously.
- Don't try to deny there's a problem and hope it will go away.
- Be diplomatic. Stay calm. Don't get angry or defensive. Don't blame, accuse or belittle other people in the process.
- Don't let small, specific conflicts mushroom into big, broad conflicts.
- Ask lots of questions. Find out what the other person is upset about. Don't debate the validity of their concerns.
- Identify the real issues. What people say may be quite different from what they're really concerned about. Often people's concerns are rooted in fear of change or the unknown or a lack of understanding, or fear of losing control or the ability to influence decisions that will affect them.
- Listen to and validate concerns. Acknowledge understanding of the concerns and offer to look into the matter.
- Be prompt when getting back to complainants with the information they need to ease their concerns.
- Stay on top of on-going problems. Keep people informed of changes on the farm and progress being made.
- Do whatever is practical to fix problems and mitigate damage.
- Admit to mistakes. Take responsibility for employees' actions.
- Apologize. Make amends if possible.
- When others make mistakes, help them save face.
- Shift the emphasis to mutually acceptable solutions.

Communication is crucial when dealing with conflict. Producers must understand why the other party feels the way it does. Ask questions if concerns are unclear and try to understand the other person's perspective.

Consequences of failing to problem solve may include:

- Bad publicity.
- Lost credibility.
- Fines and penalties.
- Loss of goodwill.
- Project delays, escalated costs.
- Increased difficulty to resolve future conflicts.
- Litigation – lawsuits and appeals.
- Referendums, petitions.
- More regulations for the whole industry.

12.3 For More Information

Contact the following offices for the publications listed or for more information.

Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (AAFRD)

Agriculture Information Centre 1-866-882-7677
Publications 1-800-292-5697

www.agric.gov.ab.ca

- *Building Community Partnerships.*
- *Building Community Support for Your Project.*
- *Living in Harmony with Neighbours.*
- *Livestock Producers as Good Neighbours.*

Canadian Farm Business Management Council

(613) 237-9060

- *Preventing, Managing and Resolving Conflicts on Canadian Farms.*
- *Farming with Neighbours.*

Human Resources Development Canada

www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca

- *The Community Development Handbook: A Tool to Build Community Capacity.*

Hoard's Dairyman

www.hoards.com

- *Getting Along with Non-farm Neighbours – Advice and Tips from Pennsylvania Dairy Farmers.*