

A black and white photograph of a farm. In the foreground, there is a field of crops, possibly corn. In the middle ground, there is a large barn with a gambrel roof and several silos. The sky is cloudy. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

# Partners in Rural Wisconsin

A Guide to  
Positive Neighbor Relations  
in Wisconsin Farm Country



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Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation	Wisconsin Cattlemen's Association
Dane County Farm Bureau	Dairy Business Association
Wisconsin Soybean Association	Wisconsin Realtors Association
Wisconsin Corn Growers Association	AgStar Financial
National Farmers Organization	Wisconsin AgriService Association
Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association	Wisconsin Pork Producers Association
Wisconsin Agri Business Council	
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Wisconsin Fertilizer & Chemical Association	
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*Adapted from the Illinois Farm Bureau Federation's  
 "Code of Country Living"*



## 1. Introduction and Purpose

### Partners in Rural Wisconsin—A Guide to Positive Neighbor Relations

As a rural landowner, you have discovered the pleasures and benefits of country living. Rural land ownership has its own unique responsibilities that require the partnership of adjoining landowners and farmers.

Life in rural Wisconsin also places you in the middle of Wisconsin agriculture—a major economic engine in our state's economy. Your farming neighbors, many of whom have been on the land for several generations, contribute a key source of economic activity and culture in your rural community. Ag businesses are also located in rural areas, providing services to farmers. They also play an important role in Wisconsin's rural landscape and economy.

This guide is intended to help build positive relationships between farmers and non-farm neighbors by providing information about the realities of agriculture and issues related to rural land ownership. It also highlights the shared responsibilities of living in the country and the qualities of rural Wisconsin.

Not only will this guide convey the unique role you play in the rural neighborhood and community, but it will help you understand the production of food and fiber that takes place around you.

This guide is designed for both farmers and non-farmers because long-term, positive relationships are a two-way street—meaning all parties have responsibilities and opportunities to build a strong understanding and trust. Remember that common sense and mutual respect are probably your most valuable tools in building positive, long-lasting relationships.



## 2. Agriculture

The production of food and fiber is the main economic engine for rural communities in the state. There are more than 79,000 farming families who produce and sell at least \$1,000 of products, including a diverse range of food and fiber.

Wisconsin is well suited for dairy and livestock production. The topography of rich flatlands, rolling prairies and steep hillsides and the abundance of natural resources help make agriculture so diverse in Wisconsin. The central sands area is well suited for potato and vegetable production, and our lowlands make Wisconsin the nation's top cranberry producer.

Regardless of size, almost all farms in the state are family-owned and operated, whether in sole proprietorships, or in family corporations. Large and small farms exist together to maintain the infrastructure and economic fabric of our rural communities.

Wisconsin agriculture provides employment to thousands of workers who transport, process, or market food products, and provide valuable production and marketing services directly to farms.

Ag businesses such as grain, milk or livestock marketing cooperatives or private companies, feed and grain suppliers, fertilizer and crop consultants, and veterinarians are just a few of many ag businesses that are vital to the success of agriculture in the state.

Wisconsin farmers and ag businesses make their living from the land—making good land stewardship an integral part of their livelihood. All farms must meet local, state and federal environmental and conservation standards.

Like other businesses, farmers and ag businesses need to manage their operations in an economically and environmentally sound manner.

*For more information on Wisconsin agriculture, visit the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection web site: [www.datcp.wi.us](http://www.datcp.wi.us) or the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation web site: [www.wfbf.com](http://www.wfbf.com).*

### Living in Farm Country

If you choose to live in the country, there are normal day-to-day farming practices that are important to understand because some may be objectionable to you. Remember, you are moving into an area where these farming practices have been used, often for over a century. They are necessary to produce the food that reaches your table.

Some of the farming practices that often bother rural landowners include: working farm machinery around the clock to get ahead of approaching weather; transporting large, slow-moving farm machinery on the roads; odors resulting from livestock and fertilizing fields with manure; and muddy roads that may occur during planting and harvesting.

### The Smells of Farming

Odors from livestock, manure, and ag chemicals can be objectionable. Farmers use best management practices to limit odor and follow government guidelines during field application of manure and ag chemicals to minimize odor impacts, control costs, and maximize yields.

Manure is a valuable source of organic plant nutrients, and it lowers the dependency on synthetic fertilizers. Here are some things farmers do to minimize odors:

- Inject manure into the ground, reducing odor by up to 75%.
- Build and maintain manure storage facilities.
- Plant trees to hide storage facilities and provide a wind break.
- Site manure storage facilities as far away from homes as possible.

### The Sights of Farming

Tilling, planting, harvesting, haying, and other farm operations can create dust, especially during windy and dry weather. That dust can easily invade your home and vehicles. Harvesting must be done within a certain timeframe to capture the highest nutritional value, yield, or crop quality. Often farmers are forced to work late into the evening to finish fieldwork before approaching rain.

Crop protectants are used to improve crop production by controlling or killing weeds and insects that destroy crops and reduce yields, which can lower

a farmer's income. These products are applied by licensed applicators who take precautions to properly handle and apply them. Posting of land applied with crop protectants is not always required, but farmers and farm supply businesses are encouraged to notify neighbors when spraying on land near a residence.

*If you have questions or concerns about these products, ask the farmer or contact your county University of Wisconsin Extension office.*

### The Sounds of Farming

Farm machinery is noisy. There's no avoiding it, especially if your house is next to a farmer's field. In the open space of the countryside, the sound may be noticeable, or may be dissipated, depending on wind conditions and other factors. Take time listen to the farm sounds you may encounter at different times of the day and year before moving to the countryside.

### Slow Moving Vehicles

Farmers are required to use Slow Moving Vehicle (SMV) emblems on the rear of farm equipment, and lights and reflectors in many cases, especially for night work. The SMV emblem has a red-orange fluorescent triangle at its center surrounded by a highly reflective red border. This is a sign you need to recognize when driving on rural roads.

Town roads are typically narrower than county roads and state highways, and modern farm machinery can be very large. The presence of farm equipment may slow your travel on rural roads. Farm tractors generally move at top speeds of 15 to 20 miles per hour so you can overtake them quickly from the rear. Watch for them and be patient. Farmers will let you pass as soon as it's safe for them to pull over. A short tap on the horn followed by a friendly wave will let the farmer know that you need to pass.

Throughout the year, farmers rely on local ag businesses for the delivery of fuel, feed or seed, and to apply fertilizer to improve crop yields. Some of this equipment may be large and slow moving as well.

Stay alert when cresting a hill because some farm equipment may be hidden from view, or extend over the center line of the road.

When you approach farm equipment that is slowing down, this may indi-

cate that the farmer is about to turn into a driveway. The most dangerous situation is when drivers try to pass farm machinery when a farmer makes a turn. It is difficult for farmers to see around equipment to know if traffic is behind them, and sometimes they will move across the center line to see around the machinery in order to make a turn.

### Right to Farm

Wisconsin's "Right to Farm" law was enacted to protect farm operations using good management practices from nuisance suits—lawsuits challenging acceptable farming practices. The law does not provide a different level of protection to larger farm operations, but is intended to allow farmers to earn their living by producing food and fiber for this country and the world.

The Right to Farm law also is a reminder to farmers that they should use responsible and accepted farming practices, and be considerate of their neighbors.

The Right to Farm law not only protects a farmer's ability to farm, but also provides neighbors with some standing if objectionable farming methods are used, which fall outside the area of good management practices. Under the Right to Farm law, farmers are protected from lawsuits if the objectionable farming practice does not threaten public health or safety. The law also provides that litigation expenses be awarded to a farmer, if sued, but is not found to be creating a nuisance.

In the interest of good neighbor relations, talk with your neighbor first about a concern or problem. Farmers are very cooperative and are open to answering your questions and concerns about farming practices. That's the most respectful approach that usually results in some resolution or understanding.

If a satisfactory response is not found, you have the right to contact an attorney to consider your options. Remember that the Right to Farm Law is intended to avoid nuisance suits and find resolutions without reverting to legal action. Understanding this can save everyone a lot of money, and reduce hard feelings and distrust.

### Expansion, Modernization and Size

Some farm operations may expand or modernize for economic, land use, or quality of life considerations.

A farm may even expand the size of its buildings and herd size under the "Right to Farm" protection, but these changes may require local zoning or permits.

Even with this protection, it is still important for farmers to talk with their neighbors about their plans. Open discussion will foster an understanding of why the changes are being made. The discussion may help the farmer take a better look at the potential impacts, and try to accommodate neighbors' concerns, if practical.

*Check with the local county zoning department or town chair for more information on zoning regulations in your county.*

### Livestock

Owners of animals are responsible to maintain control of unrestrained animals, including pets and livestock. Owners of livestock are liable for the actions of their animals and damage they may cause.

Farmers face stiff liability from property and personal damage caused by animals that break out from poor fencing. Sometimes livestock will find ways to break through even the best fencing. Do not approach livestock that are running loose. Contact the farmer immediately if you notice unrestrained livestock.

If you have problems with livestock or pets belonging to others on your property, first call the owners to mediate the problem. If a satisfactory solution cannot be reached, contact your Sheriff's department.

State farms range in size from a few acres and livestock to thousands of acres and large herds of livestock. All farms must meet local, state and federal soil and water protection requirements. Farmers take a great deal of pride in their stewardship efforts.



## 3. Neighbors

As more people move to the country, farmers and their non-farm neighbors need to engage in positive communications to develop good neighbor relations, while at the same time respecting everyone's privacy.

Developing good neighbor relations is the most effective way of understanding the elements of rural Wisconsin, and developing a positive communications link to overcome special concerns and the realities of everyday life in rural Wisconsin.

Get to know your new neighbors. Don't be afraid to drive into your neighbor's place and introduce yourself. That's the first step in being a good neighbor. Having a trusting relationship not only respects privacy, but also knows when to lend a hand.

### Be a Good Neighbor

Keep your property neat. The vast majority of farmers and rural residents take pride in keeping their homesites as presentable as possible. Be a good neighbor and do your part to keep the countryside attractive.

Become an active member of the neighborhood. Don't just keep a house in the country while spending your time and money in some distant urban or commercial center. Get involved in local community events and organizations, and patronize local businesses.

### Good Neighbor Tips

Here are some ways to develop a positive relationship with your neighbors:

- Invite your neighbors for a coffee visit or for a cookout picnic.
- Ask your neighboring farmer for a tour of their operation so you can understand how they do fieldwork or manage livestock.
- Exchange phone numbers with your neighbor in case of an emergency.
- Inform your farm neighbor of special events at your home so they can adjust their fieldwork schedules to avoid dust, sounds, or smells.

- Plan a family day with your neighbors so children from both families get acquainted with each other.

### Good Farmer Tips

- Provide a welcome gift basket to new neighbors.
- Conduct farm tours and get-togethers throughout the year.
- Offer to plow your neighbor's driveway in winter.
- Contact neighbors prior to spreading manure on fields near their homes.
- Keep farm machinery off roads during work and school "drive times" in busy areas.
- Keep roads clean after manure application and field work.

### Bad Neighbor Behaviors

- Don't wave to your neighbor.
- Honk and drive aggressively when approaching large machinery on the road.
- Call the sheriff immediately after a farmer exits the field and leaves mud or manure on the road. Don't allow time for the farmer to come back and clean off the road.
- Organize a protest against a neighbor's plan to expand without getting the details and facts.
- Complain to town officials after snowstorms about delays in road snow removal.

### Bad Farmer Behavior

- Allow livestock to frequently escape from fenced lots.
- Fail to pay for damages caused by livestock.
- Fail to remove debris from roads in a timely manner.
- Ignore questions from neighbors about farm practices.
- Do fieldwork next to a residence without providing some advanced notice for neighbors to shut windows from dust, odor, or noise.
- Make expansion or modernization changes without informing neighbors.
- Mismanage manure storage facilities or livestock areas, resulting in a serious odor problem.



## 4. Property

Property ownership is a treasured right in rural areas. Private property ownership also has shared responsibilities, some legally required, to maintain harmony between neighbors.

### Property Lines

You may be provided with a plat map of your property, but unless the land has been surveyed and pins placed by a licensed surveyor, you should not assume that the plat is accurately reflected by your current boundary markings.

What appears to be boundary fences may not necessarily be the legal boundary. Some merely approximate those boundaries. A survey of the land is the only way to confirm the location of your property lines.

### Fences

It is important to respect private property rights, but also to uphold your responsibility for maintaining fences that usually serves as property boundaries. It is your responsibility to know who's land you are on—whether or not it is fenced.

What you may consider your neighbor's fence is actually the shared responsibility of adjoining landowners.

The Wisconsin Legislature developed Chapter 90—an entire chapter of the Statutes on fences. The central provision of the law provides that if either neighbor uses and occupies land for farming or grazing, both neighbors must maintain their portion of a line fence. Each neighbor is responsible for one-half of the line fence unless some other agreement is reached.

Wisconsin's fence law requires that adjoining landowners share in a "just proportion" of the cost of constructing and maintaining a property line fence. That applies despite the fact that you may have no use for, or desire, for the fence.

There are two rules of thumb in determining which part of the fence line is yours:

1. Look at the fence standing on your property. The right half of the fence line is yours.
2. Look at how the fence is attached to posts. Your side of the fence is usually the run of fence that has the wires attached on posts facing your property.

*For more information on the Fence Law, refer to Chapter 90 of Wisconsin Statutes, or contact the Town Chair over disagreements of location and condition of fences.*

### Trespassing

The Wisconsin Trespass to Land Statute (Sec. 943.13) describes the legal definitions of trespass. Simply put, landowners are not required to post trespassing signs on their property. Wisconsin's trespass law makes it very clear—if a person is on another person's land without their permission, that person is trespassing.

County Sheriff deputies have enforcement authority over trespass violations, even during hunting seasons. Make sure you know the people you have given permission to be on your land. Department of Natural Resources wardens do not have the authority to issue trespass citations.

If your property contains public water such as navigable streams or lakes, citizens have the right to use those waters. However, they cannot cross private property to reach the water.

It is also possible that land you purchase has had a snowmobile trail on it during the winter. You are not obligated to allow access to your land on these trails, but you will find a great amount of appreciation from a local snowmobile club if you allow such access. It is the responsibility of the clubs to maintain



## 5. Nature

signs and the trails.

Not only does Wisconsin's rural landscape provide some breathtaking and enjoyable scenery, but the abundance of wild animals and native plants also places you right in the middle of nature.

### Wildlife

Wild animals can make enjoyable neighbors. However, even the most attractive wild species can cause serious problems. In general, it is best to enjoy wildlife from a distance.

Wild animals can pose serious threats to pets, livestock, vegetation, and vehicles. Small game such as raccoon, and large game such as deer and waterfowl can be very damaging to vegetation. Feeding wildlife may actually increase the problems caused by some species.

*Contact your local DNR wildlife biologist for information on managing your land for wildlife.*

### Hunting

Wisconsin has seasons for hunting small game (squirrel, rabbits, pheasants) and large game (deer, bear and turkey). Most of the hunting seasons start in the fall and run through the end of December. Hunting may be done with rifle, shotgun, bow and arrow, and other firearms. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources establishes the hunting rules and restrictions.

In rural areas, the management of wildlife populations is an ongoing effort. Local and state wildlife authorities rely on hunting as one population management control too, because some species do not have natural predators to control the size of their flocks or herds.

Farmers are particularly sensitive to the damage wildlife does to crops, but you may also notice damage to gardens or plants on your homesite. Hunting is a necessary method to control populations of some wildlife species.

If you have a large tract of land please consider allowing hunters on your property to help control populations and reduce damage. Even if hunting is allowed on adjoining property, wildlife may use your property as a refuge, making population control difficult.

You have the right to determine who can hunt, and when and where they can hunt to provide for the safety of yourself, your pets, and your property. Contact a neighbor who allows hunting to find out the best ways to participate. You may also want to contact your local DNR law enforcement official and inquire about your rights and ways to participate.

*For more information on hunting rules contact the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources at (608) 266-1877, or [www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/wildlife/hunt/](http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/wildlife/hunt/), or your local DNR Service Center.*

### Weed Control

Wisconsin's Noxious Weed Law requires the landowner to control or eradicate certain weeds on their own property, which may include mowing or chemical treatment. Some plants are even poisonous to livestock, pets or humans. Ask your neighbor for assistance in controlling weeds if you don't have the equipment to do so. Wisconsin and many counties have noxious weed lists.

*For more information contact your Town Chair or UW-Extension office.*

### Unrestrained Animals

The Wisconsin Statutes have three chapters (172-174) on owner's responsibility for their animals, and the rights of neighbors to protect their property from unrestrained animals. Local ordinances apply as well.

In many townships a dog owner is required to have a dog tag or license that also requires proof of rabies vaccination. Check with your town clerk for proper licensing. Also, it is important to keep your pet restrained to your property. It is common for dogs to wander from property to property, and in some cases this creates a safety hazard or a nuisance, and may also be illegal. Owners are liable for their animal's actions.

*To report problems with unrestrained animals, contact your county Sheriff.*



## 6. Information

Here are some useful resources regarding rural land ownership:

### Local Government

- County (or Township) Office of Zoning, Planning and/or Building
- County Recorder of Deeds
- County Clerk
- Township (or Road District) Highway Commissioner
- Local Drainage District
- County Health Department
- County Animal Control Unit
- County Sheriff's Office
- County & Township Assessors
- County Emergency Services and Disaster Agency/Officer
- County Land and Water Conservation Department
- County Zoning Department

### Local Education

- University of Wisconsin Extension Service

### Associations

- County Farm Bureau
- County commodity groups
- Local Realtors and Association
- Local Chamber of Commerce

