

Nuisance Myths and Poultry Farming

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Introduction

Poultry production is the number one agricultural enterprise in Georgia, accounting for approximately 50 percent of the value of farm products produced. Modern poultry farming originated in north Georgia in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and has continued to grow and expand as consumer demand for poultry products has increased. To meet the demands for more poultry products, producers and poultry companies across Georgia have expanded their operations by building more production and processing facilities. At the same time, the state has experienced increased urbanization and loss of agricultural lands in many of its rural counties. As cities have become more crowded and expensive to live in, many people have moved to the country to satisfy their desire for a more serene lifestyle of “country living.”

Unfortunately, many of these individuals understand very little about commercial farming practices. They often tend to be intolerant of typical farming practices that occasionally produce dust, odors and insect pests as part of a normal farming enterprise. This unfortunate set of circumstances is leading to increased conflict between farmers and citizens who have had little prior exposure to agricultural operations. In some cases, poultry farmers are finding it difficult to operate or expand their operations with new production facilities.

As poultry farming has increased in Georgia, there has been a trend toward developing zoning regulations in many counties to manage these issues and provide a viable working environment and pleasant atmosphere

for everyone. A prudent, fact-based zoning ordinance benefits all citizens. A carefully planned and devised zoning ordinance means continued success of the family-owned farm, which provides a stable, consistent tax base for the community, while simultaneously providing protection for all the citizens. Those responsible for implementing zoning regulations want to be certain that their actions are supported by facts. Conversely, a poorly designed zoning ordinance can result in unfair treatment of some members of the community and can negatively impact the economy of that community. Zoning ordinances not based on facts may lead to unnecessary community conflict and litigation.

Many times, people opposed to poultry farming promote excessively restrictive ordinances. Their purpose is to prevent or make it exceedingly difficult to expand or build new poultry production facilities based on negative perceptions of this agricultural business. Often these negative perceptions are due to a lack of accurate knowledge of modern farming practices and/or a general intolerance of any inconveniences that might be caused by commercial livestock production.

In some cases, individuals will deliberately distort the facts by using information out of context that they feel will advance their cause. Many of the contentious debates related to the development of zoning ordinances have revolved around three common myths. These three poultry farming myths are emotionally charged and are usually presented in the most negative manner to sway undecided individuals in the community. These often used myths are listed and discussed below:

Myth # 1

Poultry farms will ruin the environment.

Opponents of poultry farming will often use this argument and contend that environmental pollution is a major problem associated with poultry farming. This is not only a distortion of the facts but is a serious misrepresentation of the truth. Poultry farms do produce manure nutrients as by-products of growing birds. These manure nutrients have the potential, like any fertilizer material, to cause water pollution problems if improperly handled.

In reality, these manure nutrients have substantial value as organic fertilizer and are most often applied to fields as a replacement for commercial fertilizers. Poultry litter has been applied to fields in Georgia for this purpose for more than 50 years with no evidence that this practice causes any significant water pollution problems. In fact, the growth of the poultry industry in north Georgia and the associated proper application of poultry manure to the soil are considered primary reasons for the reclamation of once seriously depleted soils in this area. Poultry litter, in addition to containing plant nutrients, returns organic matter to the soil, increasing its productivity and drought resistance.

There are some legitimate concerns about the potential of nitrogen and phosphorous nutrients from poultry litter to contaminate surface or ground waters if too much is applied. Because of these concerns, poultry growers are implementing nutrient management plans (NMPs) across Georgia to protect water quality. NMPs are site specific plans to help poultry producers manage litter generated from their operations to take maximum value of the fertilizer component while simultaneously protecting the environment. The NMP program being used by poultry farmers has been developed by the University of Georgia and approved by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD). This NMP program is considered a proactive and effective tool to ensure the continued protection of the state's environment. In some cases, large poultry farms are required to operate under a permit from the EPD in addition to implementing NMPs as part of the state's Confined Animal Feeding Operation Rule (CAFO). Georgia's EPD also has the authority and responsibility to intercede and regulate any farm in Georgia causing an environmental problem.

A properly managed poultry farm will not pollute or cause environmental problems for neighbors or the community and, in fact, it can be very beneficial in providing a valuable fertilizer source for land owners.

Myth # 2:

Poultry Farms Smell.

Uninformed individuals often think that poultry farms will smell so badly, no one can live near them. This is incorrect. The vast majority of poultry farms are family operated and, in many cases, the operators and their families live next to, or in close proximity to, the production houses.

Properly operated poultry houses emit minimal odor. This is due to advancements in ventilation and drinking systems for poultry production houses that keep them relatively dry and thus free of any significant odor. In fact, it is not unusual to approach a modern, well managed poultry house without experiencing any or only minimal odors. The drier conditions in the houses also ensures little or no fly production associated with growing chickens. Occasionally, wet conditions can develop in a poultry house as a result of improperly functioning drinking or ventilation systems, but these situations can generally be easily corrected with changes in management. These situations may occur more frequently with breeder and layer farms than with broiler farms because of the extended period of operation with birds in the houses.

It is impossible to operate a livestock farm without having some odor or fly production as a result of normal production practices. Poultry farms, like any other livestock operation, will on occasion have some odor and fly production, but with good management these occurrences are generally short-lived and provide only minor if any inconvenience to neighbors. The odors associated with poultry production primarily occur when the houses are cleaned out and the litter is spread as a fertilizer. Clean-out schedules for operations vary but are usually no more than once or twice a year. In some cases poultry producers will even go several years before removing the litter from the houses.

Stirring and applying litter during removal causes some odor. The odor from litter application is, however, temporary and lasts from only a few hours to a few days depending on weather conditions. Appropriate management practices for applying poultry litter can reduce the occurrence and impact of this minor annoyance but may not totally eliminate it.

Fly problems occurring as a result of a poultry production operations are most often associated with mortality disposal. These problems can generally be managed with attention to proper operation and maintenance of the mortality disposal systems used. Dead bird disposal is a process permitted by the Georgia Department of Agriculture, and growers are regularly inspected and required to operate these systems properly to maintain their permits.

Myth # 3:

The air exhausted from poultry houses will damage property and cause health concerns.

The adoption of the tunnel ventilation system for poultry houses, which places all of the exhaust fans at one end of the house and concentrates the exhausted air, has led to the perception that these fans can cause problems for neighbors. The purpose of the tunnel ventilation system is to bring more fresh air into the house and move it through at a faster rate to cool the birds. These systems have been very successful in reducing the negative effects of hot weather on the growth and mortality of birds. The exhausted air from tunnel ventilation fans, however, only extends about 50 feet from the houses before it is dispersed into the atmosphere. Providing reasonable set-back separations from property lines and dwellings will ensure that operating these ventilation systems will not adversely impact neighbors.

What are reasonable set-back distances for poultry houses? Years of experience in poultry producing counties can provide some help in answering this question. Some of our highest concentrations of poultry farms are located in counties in north Georgia. These same counties have also experienced very significant urbanization over the years. Many of these counties have adopted ordinances requiring set-backs for poultry houses of 200 feet from property lines and 500 feet from dwellings as part of their zoning regulations. These distances, in most cases, have provided more than reasonable protection for all parties involved while allowing small farmers the opportunity to operate poultry farms successfully. In addition to set-back measures, poultry farms can also use vegetative buffers and diversion fences near the exhaust fans to reduce air and dust movement when deemed necessary.

The issue of set-backs from property lines and dwellings for poultry houses is an important one. In many cases, opponents of poultry house construction have advocated the need for excessive and unreasonable set-back requirements to severely restrict or totally eliminate building because of the large amount of land needed to comply. For example, requiring a 1,500 foot set-back for construction of a poultry house would require more than 260 acres to site an average size broiler operation. A set-back of 4,000 feet would

require more than 1,600 acres to build houses. In many of Georgia's counties, 1,500 feet would eliminate more than 80 percent of the poultry production operations and could cause concentration of production with the largest, most wealthy landowners. Since air does not move far from the exhaust fans, and most of the odor associated with poultry production does not come from the production house but rather from the occasional application of the litter, 200-foot set-backs from property lines and 500-foot set-backs from dwellings for poultry houses provide reasonable protection for neighbors.

Some will claim that air from poultry houses is the cause of health problems for certain people living in close proximity to a poultry farm. No evidence indicates that poultry farms pose any specific health risk to people in general. Poultry farms have been operated for more than 50 years in Georgia by thousands of farm families. The fact that these families have not experienced any significant health issues attributable to these operations would suggest that poultry farming is no more of a health risk than any other type of farming.

Conclusion

Georgia is the number one poultry producing state in the nation with some 4,000 farms in operation. We have a long history of growing, processing and marketing poultry without causing environmental or nuisance problems. Many communities in Georgia have relied upon the stable, consistent tax base provided by poultry farms to build and support local infrastructure. Farmers depend on their land to make a living and historically have been good stewards of their property. Farming in general is much more beneficial to the environment than almost any aspect of urbanization, so protecting farmers from urban encroachment is important in protecting our environment as well as our food supply.

Farms generally represent "green spaces" that protect the environment and preserve the country atmosphere. Well-managed poultry farms operating with best management practices and within state regulations need not be a source of environmental or nuisance problems for a community. Providing reasonable zoning regulations in a community will allow farmers to participate in a very dynamic and economically beneficial business while also ensuring the ability of neighbors to peacefully coexist.

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