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FARM ODORS A SIGN OF SUSTAINABLE FARMING PRACTICES *Farmers Urged to Be Considerate of Neighbors When Fertilizing Fields*

Spring is in full swing and the smell of flowers is in the air. If you live on or near a farm, there's likely to be another smell in the air as well.

You see, spring means time for fertilizer. And fertilizer means manure. And manure means, well – let's just call it the unmistakable aroma of manure.

In West Virginia, manure comes mainly from cattle and poultry. Cattle manure comes from barns and feeding areas. Chicken litter is a term that means the manure and the wood shavings that are typically used as bedding in chicken houses.

Both are rich sources of undigested nutrients that farmers use to boost the quality of pastures, hay and other crops. In fact, poultry litter is such a good fertilizer that many poultry farmers also keep cattle herds, just because they can grow such good grass to feed them.

"This is an example of what farmers have always done – using the materials on hand to improve efficiency, productivity and their bottom line," said West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) Environmental Programs Assistant Director Matt Monroe.

Is the practice organic?

Not in the formal, certifiable sense.

Is it sustainable?

Far more so than transporting manure somewhere else for disposal, and then having to buy and transport chemical-based fertilizers to the farm.

Is it legal?

In general, West Virginia's "Right To Farm" law provides protection against nuisance suits from neighbors unless "The complainant's use and occupancy ... has existed ... before the agricultural operation complained of ..." and the "conduct of such agricultural operation complained of has caused or will cause actual physical damage...."

Similar laws exist across the United States.

However, that doesn't mean that farmers shouldn't strive to be good neighbors

"Even if the farmer prevails, no one wins if a dispute ends up in court. The lost money and time simply aren't worth it," said West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick. "It's far better for a farmer to go out of his or her way to be a considerate neighbor. It will pay far more dividends in the long run."

Besides the obvious examples of being friendly and communicative, farmers can take other actions to build good relations with neighbors:

Apply manure when the wind is blowing away from neighboring homes, and avoid it around holidays where people are likely to be outdoors.

Develop and use a nutrient management plan to determine the ideal amounts and times to apply manure. The WVDA offers free nutrient management planning services to any farmer.

Keep the farm looking attractive and like somewhere you'd want to eat, even if it doesn't affect the actual operation of their farm. That will help neighbors "smell with their eyes."

Hire the neighbors' kids as summer labor. They might help their parents and classmates develop a better appreciation for farming.

Don't take the attitude that "we were here first." People need places to live and "the country" is a great place to live and raise children. Neighbors in the new housing development may not know who you are or what you do, but if they built a house, they're probably planning on staying a while.

Go out of the way to do little favors. Use the tractor to plow the neighbors' driveways when it snows. Plant a row of pumpkins or sweet corn next to the neighbors and let them know they're welcome to it. Offer them a scoop of manure for their flower beds – then they'll see what a difference it makes!