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# Facts for County Planners: Set-Backs for Poultry Houses

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One of the most important components of a zoning ordinance for poultry farms relates to the set-back distance required for the location of poultry production houses. Excessive set-back distances from property lines and dwellings have the real effect of severely restricting or totally eliminating the construction of poultry operations because of the large amounts of land required to comply. Opponents of poultry production will often advocate the most restrictive set-back distances possible to effectively shut down growth of poultry in an area. They will use uninformed and false accusations regarding environmental, air quality, health and odor issues as concerns to advance their position <sup>(1)</sup>. Thus, it is important that set-back requirements for poultry houses be based on facts rather than emotions.

## Past Experiences

Poultry production in Georgia has increased significantly over the years as demand for poultry products has increased. This increase has meant establishing new farms and constructing more production houses.

Commercial poultry production had its beginnings in north Georgia, and much of the production over the years has been concentrated in that area of the state. North Georgia also contains some of the fastest-growing counties in terms of population increases and urbanization. It is worth noting that for more than 60 years, poultry production has not only coexisted with growing populations but has thrived as a business in spite of urbanization's increasing pressures on agricultural operations. Urban sprawl and the loss of land for agricultural purposes have emphasized the need for carefully designed zoning ordinances to protect farmers and provide a blueprint for long-term community growth and viability.

Even with urban encroachment and development in many north Georgia counties, poultry production has continued to be a significant and valued business. This is a result of zoning ordinances that have not been excessively restrictive for poultry operators. As an example, some of the top poultry-producing counties (e.g. Gordon, Habersham, Hall, Franklin, Madison, Oconee, etc.) have adopted zoning regulations with set-back distances of 100' to 400' from property lines and 300' to 500' from dwellings. For many years, these set-back distances have allowed farmers to continue in poultry production and provided citizens with reasonable separations from farming activities. More recently, research at the University of Georgia <sup>(2)</sup> has confirmed that these distances provide enough separation to adequately protect neighbors of poultry operations from air discharges from poultry houses.

## Set Back Distances and Acreage Requirements

The greater the set-back distance adopted, the more acreage is required to site poultry houses. For example, a 200' set-back from property lines requires a minimum of 14 acres to site four poultry houses, if the land is perfectly rectangular. Increasing the set-back to 400' increases the requirement to a minimum of 30 acres, while 1000' requires at least 130 acres. Since many plots of land are irregular in shape, property boundaries and topography often necessitate more acreage. In reality, a 200' set-back requires at least 30 to 40 acres to meet site needs for an average four-house operation. A 1000' set-back could realistically require several hundred acres to site four poultry houses for many tracts of land. According to the 2002 Census of Agriculture, 74 percent of Georgia farms have less than 180 acres<sup>(3)</sup>. Thus, a 1000' set-back requirement eliminates large numbers of family-owned farms from the poultry production industry.

One of the historically important aspects of poultry production has been the opportunity for small farmers to participate in a viable agricultural enterprise. In a time when agricultural land is shrinking and the acreage requirements for many agricultural commodities is increasing, it is important to protect family farms. Since no scientific basis exists to support excessive set-back requirements for poultry houses, and since Georgia poultry farmers have shown for more than 60 years that they can coexist with neighbors while making significant economic contributions to the community, it is incumbent on community officials to protect this business opportunity.

## References

- <sup>(1)</sup> *Nuisance myths and poultry farming*. Dan L. Cunningham, Department of Poultry Science, University of Georgia Extension Bulletin 1299, March, 2006.
- <sup>(2)</sup> *Ammonia concentrations downwind of broiler houses*. B.D. Fairchild, M. Czarick, L.A. Harper, J.W. Worley, C.W. Ritz, B.D. Hale, and L.P. Naeher. *Poultry Science* 87: 62 Suppl. 1.
- <sup>(3)</sup> *The 2008 Georgia County Guide*. Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development, The University of Georgia, January 2008.

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