

9.0 PREVENTING, MANAGING AND RESOLVING CONFLICT

9.1 What is Conflict?

Conflict is a struggle between two or more parties because of a real or perceived difference in needs or values. When people or groups of people are unable to reach a satisfactory understanding of their mutual issues, the result can be disagreement or conflict.

Conflict is inevitable. Most people think conflict is negative or bad, and try to avoid it. However, conflict that is properly managed can be productive and constructive.

Conflict:

- Encourages people to examine issues more carefully.
- Deepens the understanding of problems.
- Opens the door to new ideas and alternative solutions.
- Helps people foresee the consequences of proposed actions.
- Enables people to take risks and solve problems.

9.1.1 Conflict in agriculture

In recent years, the number and intensity of conflicts facing confined feeding operations (CFOs) 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 has inquiry into the agri-food industry and its practices.

A 1998 survey of Canadian farm organizations and producers identified conflict over 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.

In early 1999, focus groups were held across Canada to learn about producers' experiences with farm and community conflicts. The focus groups also gathered ideas on dealing with conflict situations. The purpose of the study was to develop strategies and tools to manage conflict. Representatives from municipal, regional and provincial governments were also consulted during the study. From this CFBMC study and the current Alberta situation, the following sources of farm conflict have been identified.

9.1.2 Sources of conflict

Neighbours may have the following concerns about feedlot production:

- The biggest concern is that feedlot production will disrupt their quality of life and affect their health, mainly due to nuisance odour and dust. Feedlot producers can lessen anxiety by exercising caution, consideration and common sense. While manure odour and dust may not be an issue to those living

or working on the feedlot, others may find it offensive. A commitment to sound manure management is a necessity. Once that commitment is made, it must be kept.

- Another concern is the possibility of groundwater and surface water contamination.
- Nuisance related to storage and handling of dead animals also creates conflict.

9.2 Preventing Conflict

The single most important thing feedlot producers can do to reduce the risk of conflict is to ensure communication with neighbours is open, honest and thorough. This kind of communication is essential to lessen the impact of feedlot production on neighbours and to understand what upsets neighbours.

Focus group participants also suggest that compliance with the laws governing confined feeding operations should be regarded as the bare minimum. Employing progressive feedlot management practices and doing the very best job possible will help prevent conflicts.

The following tips and strategies to help feedlot producers prevent, manage and resolve conflict are based on the Canadian Farm Business Management Council focus groups involving producers and government representatives.

A copy of the report, *Farming with Neighbours, A Guide for Canadian Farmers on Preventing and Resolving Community Conflicts over Farming Practices*, is available from the Canadian Farm Business Management Council (phone: 1-800-232-3262, fax: 1-800-270-8301 e-mail: council@cfbmc.com).

9.2.1 Be a good neighbour

Feedlot producers need to communicate with all of their neighbours to build “social capital” that can be drawn upon like a bank account when problems do arise. Being a good neighbour, having a public relations strategy for the feedlot and contributing to the community are good ways to build up social equity within the community.

Knowing and understanding neighbours is the first step in addressing concerns about a livestock operation.

Feedlot producers should consider the following:

- Get to know the neighbours and let them get to know the feedlot operation.
- Be friendly.
- Keep neat, well-maintained feedlots which are less likely to draw complaints.

- Be helpful to neighbours in need.
- Get involved in the community. Join a local service group.
- Support local businesses. Hire local youths.
- Develop a public relations program for the feedlot. Support and make donations to local charities and community groups such as sports teams and youth groups. Get the feedlot recognized for its contributions.
- Host feedlot tours, within the constraints of the operation’s biosecurity protocol, but do a dry run to prevent unintended negative consequences.
- Help neighbours learn more about the feedlot. Explain why feedlot producers do what they do. Have an open house, picnic, barbecue or potluck.

9.2.2 Open house/feedlot tours

Several types of tours can be organized:

A public open house prior to building:

- Is a common approach for spreading information in a community.
- Can be used early in a new project development to gather ideas and test initial reaction of neighbours and the local community.
- Allows the public to learn more about the project.
- Provides neighbours with an opportunity to express their concerns.
- Ideally, are held in a neutral location.

A feedlot tour held on-site prior to start-up:

Showcase the features of the feedlot operation to the livestock industry and the community.

A tour of existing feedlots:

Follow the feedlot’s biosecurity plan during tours and incorporate the plan into the tour so that participants will learn more about generally accepted feedlot practices.

Annual summer BBQ for neighbours:

The payback from investing in annual community events is the good will that is generated and the opportunity for neighbours to ask questions in a relaxed atmosphere.

Tips for conducting a successful feedlot tour or open house:

- Find out who plans to come, why, and what they want to see.
- Decide in advance and tell guests whether photos are allowed.
- Do a dry run. Walk around the feedlot, ideally with a non-farm friend to get input on the way guests will see it. Remember, normal feedlot practices may be of concern to non-farmers.
- Ensure there are no hazards to public safety on the tour and that the feedlot is clean and tidy and livestock are healthy. Avoid waste disposal areas, sick pens, dead pits, and storage areas for medications and agricultural chemicals. Avoid direct contact with cattle.
- Anticipate the questions guests are likely to ask, including challenging issues, such as food safety, genetically modified foods, chemicals and residues, air and water, as well as soil pollution and animal welfare. Have clear, factual, well-reasoned answers ready for these questions.
- Practise answering questions with family members or colleagues. Video the practise session. Appear confident; otherwise people may think questions are being avoided or the truth is being concealed.
- If the answer to a question is not known, say so. Then offer to find an answer. Do not be baited or goaded into saying something that will be regretted later.
- Plan the feedlot tour and develop a presentation for each different visiting group. Emphasize the positive. Draw attention to the modern practices feedlot producers are using to address society's concerns, as well as the feedlot industry's contribution to the economy and community fabric.
- Tailor each presentation to the audience. Whether guests are school children, politicians, business people or other farmers, avoid using feedlot jargon.
- Talk about relevant topics; do not allow yourself to be sidetracked.
- If possible, look for opportunities to borrow professional displays on topics of interest.
- Have technical experts available to answer questions and enhance confidence in the feedlot operation's technology.
- If appropriate and in keeping with the biosecurity protocol, provide an activity that involves guest participation.
- Provide washrooms and hand disinfection facilities.
- Smile. Have fun. Guests should leave with good feelings about the tour.

9.2.3 Further advice

- Have a good attitude. Be considerate and respectful of others' concerns and opinions.
- Know the rights of feedlot producers and others. Recognize that it would be foolish to insist on acting on some rights.
- Let neighbours know in advance when manure spreading is planned. If neighbours have special events planned, try to work around them.
- When possible, avoid feedlot practices that are noisy, dusty or cause odour on or immediately before weekends, especially long weekends.
- Before planning to expand, diversify or make changes to the feedlot operation, consider the impact on neighbours and the environment. Prepare an assessment of the local situation, detailing assumptions and understandings about who the neighbours are, what they care about, potential problems and the plans for addressing any issues.
- Try to anticipate other peoples' reactions. Have answers for their concerns.
- Do not let minor disputes blow out of control.
- Fight battles privately, away from public and media view.
- Learn how to deal with and develop a relationship with the media, municipal and provincial governments.
- Search out individuals and groups that can be allies. Identify, inform and involve people who support the feedlot operation and enlist their help in dealing with opponents.
- Concentrate on keeping supporters happy. Do not spend the majority of available resources dealing with opponents.

9.3 Managing Conflict

9.3.1 Damage control

Sometimes conflict is unavoidable, no matter how much effort has been made to resolve an issue. When conflict does erupt, manage it to minimize the damage. Canadian farmers had the following tips to help prevent a conflict from escalating:

- Take the matter seriously.
- Do not try to deny there's a problem and hope it will go away.
- Stay calm. Avoid getting angry or defensive. Refrain from blaming, accusing, chiding or belittling other people; it could escalate the conflict.
- Think before acting or speaking. Sleep on it. Be diplomatic.
- Prevent small, specific conflicts from mushrooming into big, broad conflicts.
- Ask lots of questions. Find out what the other person is upset about. Don't debate their issues.
- Search out and 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.
- Deal with emotions first. Then deal with the subject of the conflict.
- 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 ongoing problems. Keep people informed of changes on the feedlot and progress being made.
- Do whatever is practical to fix problems and mitigate damage.
- Always tell the truth.
- 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.

Consequences for failing to problem solve may include:

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

9.4 Resolving Conflict

The most common reason for discussion breakdown and disagreement is poor communication. Communication is a fundamental element of resolving issues and therefore must be understood and practised well. Producers should listen and understand first, and then explain their intentions. Listening also means understanding the

meaning of the other person's message from their perspective as communicated by their words and behaviour.

In today's society, conflict prevention management and resolution skills are essential. Learning the skills necessary to prevent, manage and resolve conflict will boost farmers' personal and collective competitiveness and prosperity.

9.5 References

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