

Set-Backs for Poultry Houses: Facts for County Planners

Dr. Dan L. Cunningham
Department of Poultry Science
University of Georgia

One of the most important and critical components of a zoning ordinance for poultry farms relates to the set-back distance required for the location of poultry production houses. Excessive setback 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. **For these reasons, opponents of poultry production will often advocate the most restrictive setback distances possible to effectively shut down growth of poultry in the area.** They will use uninformed and false accusations regarding environmental, air quality, health, and odor issues as concerns to advance their position (1). Thus, it is important that set back requirements for poultry houses be based on factual information rather than emotional positions.

Past Experiences. Poultry production in Georgia has increased significantly over the years as demand for poultry products has increased. For example, in 1960 Georgia produced approximately 300 million broilers. By 2007, however, the number of broilers produced in Georgia had grown to **1.4 billion**. The increases in the numbers of broilers produced over the years have required the establishment of new farms and construction of more production houses in the state. Commercial poultry production had its beginnings in north Georgia, and thus, much of the production over the years has been concentrated in this area of the state. North Georgia also contains some of the fastest growing counties in terms of population increases and urbanization. Thus, it is worth noting, that for more than 60 years, poultry production has not only coexisted but has thrived as a business in north Georgia even though urbanization has increased pressure on agricultural operations in many of these counties. **Urban sprawl and the loss of land for agricultural purposes in Georgia have emphasized the need for carefully designed zoning ordinances to protect farmers as well as providing a blue print for the long term growth and viability of a community.**

Even with urban encroachment and development in many of our north Georgia counties, poultry production has continued to be a significant and valued business. This is a result of having zoning ordinances that have not been excessively restrictive for poultry operators. As an example, some of our top poultry producing counties (e.g. Gordon, Habersham, Hall, Franklin, Madison, Oconee, etc.) have adopted zoning regulations utilizing set back distances of 100' to 400' from property lines and 300' to 500' from dwellings. These set back distances have allowed farmers to participate in poultry production as well as providing citizens of these communities with reasonable separations from farming activities for many years. More recently, research at the

University of Georgia (2) has confirmed that these distances provide enough separation to adequately protect neighbors of poultry operations from concerns regarding air discharges from poultry houses.

Set Back Distances and Acreage Requirements. The greater the set back distance adopted, the more acreage that will be required to site poultry houses. For example, a 200' set back from property lines would require a minimum of 14 acres to site four poultry houses if the plot of land was perfectly rectangular. Increasing the set back to 400' increases the acreage requirement to a minimum of 30 acres, while 1000' would require at least 130 acres. Since many plots of land are irregular in shape, property boundaries and topography will often ensure that more acreage is needed. In reality it generally requires at least 30 to 40 acres to meet site needs for an average four-house operation with a 200' set back. 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% of the farms in Georgia have less than 180 acres (3). Thus, a 1000' set back requirement would have the effect of eliminating large numbers of family owned farms from the opportunity to participate in this beneficial agricultural business. **One of the important aspects of poultry production is that it has allowed small farmers an opportunity to participate in a viable agricultural enterprise.** In a time where lands for agricultural purposes are shrinking and the acreage requirements for profitability for many of our agricultural commodities is increasing, it is important that protection for our family farms is assured. **Since there is no scientific basis to support excessive set back requirements for poultry houses and with more than 60 years of poultry production in Georgia indicating that poultry farmers can coexist with neighbors while making significant economic contributions to the community, it is incumbent on community officials to protect this business opportunity for their farmers.**

REFERENCES

1. *Nuisance myths and poultry farming.* Dan L. Cunningham, Department of Poultry Science, University of Georgia, Bulletin # 1299, March, 2006.
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3. *The 2008 Georgia County Guide.* Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development, The University of Georgia, January 2008.