

Successful Siting of New and Expanding Operations – A Saskatchewan Perspective

Donn Farrer

P.Eng., Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, Room 201, 3085 Albert St., Regina SK S4S 0B1
Email: dfarrer@agr.gov.sk.ca

In this article, I will share with you both professional and personal observations that relate to successful livestock expansion on the prairies. In preparing this paper, one suggestion was to highlight one or two success stories, presumably with a view to discovering the key to publicly acceptable development. As I reviewed some statistics for our program, this was not an easy task. Of the 294 approvals issued for intensive livestock development under our program over the past six years only 12 of the 294 projects have faced a focused and sustained opposition. 95% have been well accepted. These projects have developed in a wide array of communities and under a wide variety of circumstances. Certainly there are some characteristics of these projects we want to look at in a few minutes, however all success stories are not transferable, and I will share some examples of things that worked in one community, but fell flat in others.

▪ **Background**

The Saskatchewan agriculture industry consists of: 65 million arable acres of which 46 million are cultivated and less than one half million are irrigated; one million cows, 600,000 calves which are exported for feeding; 1.4 million market pigs per year; a modest dairy herd of 36,000 head; and a small but stable poultry industry of 16 million birds. Saskatchewan is clearly under developed in livestock.

From a regulatory point of view, a pollution control program for intensive livestock operations has existed since 1971. Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF) delivers the program, in close cooperation with other government agencies.

SAF is responsible for collecting, reviewing and approving applications under the Act. All applications are subject to review by local, provincial and federal agencies (where applicable).

- Referral agencies include Environment and Resource Management, Sask Water Corporation, Health, Highways, Occupational Health and Safety, Municipal Affairs Culture and Housing, host municipalities and local urban municipalities.
- SAF applications for large projects are pre-screened under the Environmental Assessment Act and / or the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act.
- Public process is highly encouraged and public notice is mandatory for large proposals.

SAF approval concentrates on aspects of manure and dead animal management necessary to prevent water pollution.

- Municipalities have responsibility for land use, zoning and separation distance.
- ½ of 297 municipalities have a bylaw, and about ½ of those are up to date.

■ **Characteristics of Success**

For the sake of argument, I will define success as projects that are “Environmentally Sound and Socially Acceptable”. On that basis, I suggest the following characteristics are key to success:

Championship

- Community commitment in the form of by laws and economic development plans is required.

Flexibility

- Look for good advise and follow it, even if you didn't want to hear it.
- Sound technical criteria are a must.

Communications

- Frequent, open and honest communications are required.
- Accessibility. Make sure the local public has access to people in the organization who can really make decisions.
- Communications must be two way; listen to what you hear.

- Communications must be ongoing; need to continue after the fact.

Ownership

- Don't rely on regulatory processes as a defense. This is your project, what do you want it to look like?

Trust is built and earned in small steps and commitments made by owners or executives will assure the public that the commitments are sincere and part of your corporate culture.

▪ **Examples of Successful Siting**

Red Coat Feeders 20,000 Head Feedlot

Championship

- Locally owned and developed, committee of 14 local people
- One full time coordinator
- 200 investors

Communications

- 3 general public meetings and several shareholder meetings
- 7 newsletters from inception to construction (about two years)

Flexibility

- Investigated and ruled out two sites before deciding on third

Ownership

- Committee members were highly visible and active in the project, people knew who to talk to, promises were kept
- Regulatory process played a small role

PIC 2500 Sow Genetic Nucleus Unit

Championship

- Rural Development Cooperative had made commitment to pork well in advance

Communications

- Widespread advertising, media coverage and news releases
- Public meetings (and dinner)
- One on one with the Vice President

Flexibility

- Accepted higher standards

Ownership

- Senior Executives, including a Vice President and director of Environmental affairs, present for all public contact

I use these two examples for a reason. On the surface, Red Coat Feeders seems to be a natural success story. A community driven feedlot in the heart of cow country should be an easy win, but the point here is that the developers did not take that for granted. Concerns were expressed at several junctures of the project and the proponents were quick to acknowledge and deal with the concerns at the local level.

On the other hand, you might expect that a large hog operation owned by Americans with no ties to the community would be easily rejected, but that was not the case. Even though the proponents did not enjoy the advantage of local presence and recognition, they took the steps to align themselves with a highly committed economic development group, and senior officials took a personal stake in development of the site.

I believe a commonality with these two projects, however, is that the local public were prepared for this type of development. In the case of Red Coat, six-10,000 head contract feeder barns had been developed in nearby municipalities the previous year and people knew what to expect. For PIC, a successful hog farmer in the area was a positive case study that led the REDA to actively pursue this type of development. People knew what to expect.

By comparison, some communities simply are not prepared, and fear becomes the real and dominant mood. For example, some of my farm neighbours have assured me that "We don't have to worry about a big hog barn in our area because we are ONLY 14 miles from the city." At the same time, I have asked our municipal councillor if the municipality had considered how they might deal with a proposal for a large hog barn. I was assured it would never happen. Clearly, this community is not prepared and will have a very difficult time supporting a new development.

■ Conclusion

Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet and no guarantees. What one community finds acceptable may be totally unacceptable in another community. An approach that works in one community may not work in another. Consider two situations we faced last year.

Early in the year, in North Eastern Saskatchewan, a major hog developer faced on-going opposition to the development of a 5000 sow three-site production unit. The project was aligned with a local proponent group, several public meetings were held and there was municipal support. Nonetheless, opposition from some local area farmers persisted. They stressed that all their concerns about water contaminations, air pollution, disease transmission, odour and allergies to hog dander would be addressed if the project were to use a solid based manure system.

Later in the year, in the Southwest, a family farm decides to build a contract feeder barn using a solid based manure system. In the absence of a well-defined public process, the project has faced several ongoing objections from neighbours. The host municipality has been faced with livestock development controversy several times in the past 10 years, but remains without a land use bylaw.

In the first case, I think it would be dangerous to suggest that solid manure alone would have prevented the public outcry, it certainly didn't in the southwest. In the second case, I am skeptical that public process alone would have resolved the complaints, but it would have been a first step. The observation that this municipality remains without land use controls suggests they are not committed to livestock development and have not given any serious thought to what they want their economic profile to look like.

Remember, the vast majority of projects are well received. Proponents have developed a lot of expertise in project development. Processes and regulations are better defined. Expertise in engineering, business planning and even public process exist and more communities are aware of, and expecting, new livestock operations to develop in their communities.