



Moving to the Country?

Marley Beem

Assistant Extension Specialist

A relaxed pace of life, pretty scenery, and good neighbors can make you glad you are putting your roots down in rural Oklahoma. Unfortunately moving to the country does not always work out as smoothly as we might wish. This fact sheet is designed to help you get a good start and avoid the most common pitfalls faced by newcomers.

Your Home in the Country

Whether you buy or build, there can be unpleasant and expensive surprises if you do not proceed carefully. Keep in mind that there are generally no regulations on building and landuse practices in rural areas.

The following checklist may help you avoid some serious potential problems:

Flooding

— Areas along creeks and rivers are often beautiful but prone to flooding. Be wary of flat areas along creeks and rivers. Flood plains are best left as farmland or to natural vegetation and not used for buildings.

Sometimes flood-prone areas are not obvious. They may result from blocked or under-sized culverts downstream. Even a dry branch can flood occasionally. Ask the neighbors – they usually know the flood-prone areas.

Fire

- Educate yourself about the threat of fire to countryside homes by reading the information at www.firewise.org.
- Brush or tall grass close to a house can pose a serious fire risk. Be especially wary of eastern redcedar trees. Contact local fire authorities for recommendations on how wide a zone to keep cleared around your home.
- How many minutes is it from the nearest fire department? Many rural fire departments require membership and annual dues for an emergency call.
- Is fire insurance available and affordable? Many insurers will not issue fire coverage on properties if fire protection is more than 5 miles away.
- Is there water available to fight a fire? For farm fire protection, consider providing 20 gallons per minute (gpm) at a pressure of 60 pounds per square inch (psi).

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets are also available on our website at:
<http://osufacts.okstate.edu>

Security

- Are there friendly neighbors to help keep an eye on your place? Or is the house out of sight with easy road access for thieves? Many people believe the best security lies in having a home that is visible from a well-traveled road, but set back some distance from the road.
- Trespassing hunters and mailbox vandals are a problem in many areas. Ask the neighbors!
- Security lighting sometimes makes things worse by creating glare that discourages looking at an area.

Resale Value

- Is it “too much house for the neighborhood?” Find out the average size and price of homes in the area. Do not build too expensive a home unless you are prepared to stay a while or take a large loss when you sell.

Termites

- These costly insects are attracted to any wood in contact with the ground. Get a good inspection and do not stack firewood against the house.

Critters

- Gophers, moles, tarantulas, and snakes are part of the natural environment. You are moving into their neighborhood, so be prepared to meet them! Initial impressions are often wrong: tarantulas are harmless, but “beautiful deer” can destroy gardens and ornamental plants.

Water

- Silly as it sounds, some people have bought land intending to build a home only to find out that there is no water. If there is rural water, supply is assured, but the cost may be higher than you expect. Private wells introduce the problems of quantity and quality.
- Does the well yield enough? A four bedroom home with two bathrooms should have at least 14 gpm that can be sustained for two hours. For more information ask to see Midwest Planning Service publication no. 14, “Private Water Systems Handbook” at the county Extension office – it is in the Water Quality Reference Notebook.

- ___ Is the well in good mechanical shape? Ask about the age and condition of the pump, casing, pressure tank, etc. If in doubt have a licensed professional inspect it.
- ___ Is the well at high risk of being contaminated?
- ___ Test well water for bacteria and nitrates.

Schools

- ___ Check out the local schools firsthand and ask the neighbors their opinion.
- ___ Bus routes can be very long in some areas.
- ___ Due to size and funding many rural schools may not offer the full range of courses you might want your kids to take in the higher grades.

Dumping

- ___ Banks may refuse to loan money on properties with private trash dumps or that have other pollution problems. They do not want to risk being stuck with cleanup costs.
- ___ Illegal roadside dumping is an ongoing problem for many rural landowners.

Septic Systems

- ___ If possible, have the septic system inspected and the septic tank pumped before you purchase the property. Many rural homes suffer from septic systems that can not handle enough waste water. Drainfields may be undersized or clogged. The soil around the lateral lines will be clogged by solids, if the septic tank has not been pumped often enough. Foul odors and soaked topsoil will often result, but may not be evident if the house has been vacant. Installing new lateral lines, a lagoon, or alternative treatment system can be very expensive or sometimes impossible.

Foundation Problems

- ___ Shrink-swell problem soils are common in many parts of the state and can crack foundations and walls. In existing homes look for cracks in the walls around windows and doors. If in doubt consider hiring an expert to evaluate the problem, and see Extension Fact Sheet, F-9406 “Soil Considerations in Home Site Selections.”

Beautiful Trees

- ___ Trees are easily weakened and killed by construction activity. You may need to temporarily fence off a large buffer zone to protect a tree’s root zone from heavy equipment (see Extension Fact Sheet, F-6429 “Site Disturbance and Tree Decline”).
- ___ Large trees can be beautiful but be aware of the risk they pose to nearby buildings in Oklahoma’s severe weather. Pruning or removal may be needed.

Easements, Mineral, and Oil Rights

- ___ Powerlines, pipelines, roads, or other features may cross a property if an easement has been granted. Use of your roads by neighbors or others can also be an issue.
- ___ If you do not own the mineral rights to your property, drilling may be conducted regardless of your consent, even close to your home. Oil drilling and production activities can be,

but are not always, done in a responsible manner. See Extension Fact Sheet, F-857 “Use of the Surface for Oil and Gas Development in Oklahoma,” and OSU Extension Publication, E-940 “Pollution Prevention at Exploration and Production Sites in Oklahoma: Best Management Practices for Erosion and Pollution Control.”

Zoning

- ___ Only a few counties in Oklahoma have zoning ordinances to control the way land is used. Without zoning, your neighbors can do almost anything including operating junkyards, open pit mines, dance halls, etc. New zoning regulations need not be harsh – existing landuses can be “grandfathered in.”

Real Estate Transactions

- ___ The services of a lawyer, a title search, title insurance, and a complete abstract are usually considered essential.
- ___ The county clerk’s office is the place to visit to check on possible liens, easements, or other title problems with a property you are considering purchasing.
- ___ Legal descriptions of land are based on the section-township-range system (see Extension Fact Sheet F-9407 “Legal Land Descriptions in Oklahoma”).

Is it Worth the Commute?

Many dream of finding a place in the country that is still close to town. In the real world it is usually a trade-off; the prettier the countryside, the farther it is to work, shopping, and healthcare. If you have not put up with long drives before, then you may not know how you will adjust until you try it. Long commutes mean extra costs for fuel and vehicle repairs.

Consider the roads you will be using: are they well maintained and smooth or do they shake you and your vehicle? Will they be passable during heavy rains or snowstorms? Also, do not overlook bridges; are they in good repair or coming to the end of their useful life?

Meet the Neighbors

Most people move to the countryside without running into serious neighbor problems, but it always pays to get to know the neighbors before buying a property. Take the time to introduce yourself and visit a while. If possible, rent first in an area you find desirable – this will let you see if you like the locals and vice versa.

Closely knit rural communities can sometimes be slow to accept outsiders. You may be surprised to find that you have less privacy in the countryside than you did while living in town. Word spreads fast about newcomers, so it is probably best to be somewhat open with people to help head off false rumors. Shop locally and use the local post office. Consider joining your rural volunteer fire department. Hire local people to do needed work on your place. These are the kinds of things you can do to open lines of communication and let neighbors know you want to be part of their community.

Rural Living Means More Work

Chores are not just for kids. Whether you plan to do it all yourself or hire it done, there is work that must be done to maintain and improve rural properties. A “be prepared” attitude is important when living in the country. Rural power may go off more often and stay off longer. Driveways and roads may be blocked by snow for several days or longer. Fires may be a big worry during dry summers.

Here are a few chores that probably need to be done on your new place:

- ___ Repair old fences and build new ones.
- ___ Use Home*A*Syst to determine if your well is at high or low risk of contamination. How old are the pump and other system components? Water does not have to taste or smell bad to be unsafe, so test it regularly and keep toxic chemicals, livestock waste, and septic systems far from your well. If a new well is needed be sure it is drilled correctly.
- ___ Inspect your heating system. Do you have a reliable backup system like wood heat, propane, or kerosene heaters in case the power goes out?
- ___ Inspect your septic system – find out where it is and make a map showing the tank and lateral line field. If the tank has not been pumped in the last three to five years call a licensed septic tank pumper.
- ___ Improve fire protection – talk to the local fire district and the county Extension office about fire breaks, prescribed burns to reduce fire risk (OSU Extension Publication, E-927, “Using Prescribed Fire in Oklahoma”), installing dry hydrants, and other steps you should take to protect your home and property.

Is Agriculture for Me?

For many people, moving to the country means some sort of agricultural enterprise. Even if this does not include you, be prepared for neighbors who farm. You may well be trading the hustle and bustle and noises of the city for the occasional smell of manure, blowing dust from newly plowed fields, and other normal “by-products” of agriculture. Hopefully the smell of newly cut hay, the sight of sleek livestock, and other positives will more than make up for the negatives.

Whether it is a few head of cattle, a half-acre of grapes, or a thousand acres of native oak and pine trees, do your homework before you spend your first dollar.

- Is your land suited for what you want to produce?
- Do you have the time, energy, and know-how?
- Work out a budget and get it reviewed by someone knowledgeable – does it project a realistic profit?

“We thought raising blueberries would be fun. After four years we feel like it is an albatross. Our kids didn’t take to it like we thought they would.” – Extension client

Many fact sheets on a wide range of agricultural enterprises are available through your county’s Cooperative Extension Service office. Check out OSU Extra, OSU’s fact sheet database. Also, take advantage of the expertise of the local Extension Agriculture Educator.

In return for their efforts, farmers enjoy an independent, countryside lifestyle, and hopefully, a reasonable return on their investment most years. For those accustomed to the satisfactions of farming, nothing can make them give it up without deep pangs of regret. Newcomers to farming should start small and learn as they grow the size of their operation. Anything bigger than hobby size demands solid economic planning – ask your county’s Cooperative Extension Service office for assistance.

Protecting Your Land Investment

It is exciting to consider making big changes to a piece of property. But before you call in a bulldozer, sign a logging contract, or start building your livestock herd, be certain that your land can handle it. Some of the very things you may be trying to enhance in a piece of property can be destroyed by too much alteration.

The basic elements of your land are soils, plant cover, and water. You might want to improve wildlife populations, improve scenic beauty, produce agricultural products, or do some of each. Regardless of your objectives, you can fail and damage the land in the process if you do not understand and respect the limits of these three basic elements. Common examples of damage to the land include overgrazing, erosion-prone roads, and clearing of brush from erosion-prone areas like hillsides or creekbanks. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) can provide more information on erosion control and prevention measures.

Soils

Some soils allow rainfall to soak in quickly while others shed it. Some soils will erode quickly if plant cover is removed or becomes sparse. Some are suited to intensive farming, some to pastures, and some best left alone under native plant cover. The best uses for the different parts of your property depend upon the types of soil present. The NRCS has produced soil surveys for the entire state. The aerial maps in the survey allow you to determine locations of different types of soil on your property as well as their best uses and limitations. Take advantage of this resource and get to know your soils.

Plant Cover

Wise landowners also know the plants found on their property. Plants are protectors of the soil and the base of the food chain for wildlife or livestock. A tremendous resource offered by the Noble Foundation at www.noble.org/imagegallery helps you identify local plants. The NRCS has developed Ecological Site Guides from which you can determine the health of your plant community. As a rule of thumb, native plants are more desirable than introduced ones and the more kinds of plants that can be found on a property, the better. If you do not know your plants you are apt to be blindsided by problems such as poisonous plants and invasive plants. Overgrazing and lack of periodic fire are probably the major causes of harm to the health of native plant communities.

In eastern Oklahoma, logging is a common choice faced by landowners. Do not be rushed into a decision about selling your timber. Expert advice is available from both the

Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry and private forestry consultants. The gist of managing for good timber is to cull out deformed trees for firewood, and thin when needed to leave the strongest, straightest trees room to grow into valuable trees. Do not agree to a logging plan that calls for harvesting high quality logs and leaving only poor quality trees to reproduce. If wildlife enhancement is one of your goals, leave some dead trees. The worst damage to the environment occurs when poorly constructed logging roads are left to erode, choking streams and lakes with sediment.

Land must be kept in use if you want it to look the same. If introduced pastures are not grazed, they will revert back to some native plants. For more information about the benefits of restoring native plants, read F-2864 "Grazing Forest Range in Eastern Oklahoma". If you are not interested in grazing cattle it may be to your benefit to lease out the grazing rights to a neighbor. Do not, however, expect short-term lessees to do more than the minimum maintenance necessary to achieve their goals.

Water

Well-protected land collects rainfall, filters it through soil and plant root zones, and either holds it as soil moisture for plants or slowly releases it as flow in streams, groundwater, or springs. Many landowners report that their springs and streams no longer flow as they did in past decades or that their shallow wells have gone dry. This is often the result of changes in plant cover, soil erosion, or other factors that have increased runoff and decreased the land's ability to soak up rainfall and gradually release it. Improved plant cover and soil conservation practices can slowly restore many degraded properties.

Creeks, rivers, and lakefront areas – "That creek, river, or lakefront would be so pretty if I just cleared off all that brush" – Think again: the deep, interlocking root systems of those plants are holding the soil in place against the cutting power of the flowing water or waves. Ugly cut banks and loss of land are the usually what happens when you clear away brush or other native vegetation. Man-made retaining walls are difficult to properly design and very expensive to build and maintain. They can also deflect the water causing erosion elsewhere. Wise landowners leave a wide buffer of natural vegetation along the water's edge.

Ponds – A beautiful pond is an asset that requires protection. Heavy cattle use leads to trampled shorelines, dam erosion, and other problems. Trees should not be allowed to grow on dams or they will weaken them and lead to leaking. Muddy water is usually a sign of soil erosion somewhere above the pond in the watershed. Excess nutrients from fertilizer runoff, livestock waste, or unpumped septic systems can cause excessive algae growth.

I think what made the biggest impression on me was his deep connection to the land and all that affected it. He knew the ranch the way a goldfish knows what goes on inside its bowl. His antennae picked up changes in the weather, the cows, the wildlife, and the cowboys. If the grass itched, the wind complained, or the snow lay too long in the shadows, he knew it.

– Baxter Black, A Good Teacher Retires

Wildlife – Friend or Foe?

People often ignore wildlife until there is a problem – then it is all out war. Get familiar with your critters ahead of time and chances are that you will have fewer and less severe problems.

- Take the time to completely screen basement, crawlspace, and attic openings to avoid unwelcome visitors in your home.
- Resist the temptation to feed wildlife other than backyard birds – raccoons and other critters can become serious pests. Let wild animals stay wild.
- Expensive landscape plants may not be a good idea in areas with an abundant deer population.

Wild dogs are a problem in rural areas. They can be a threat to livestock, or in rare cases, people. Sadly most of these animals were dumped in the countryside by someone thinking it kinder than taking them to an animal shelter. Housecats also revert to the wild where they are very harmful to game and song bird populations. Wild hogs are also a major problem in some places.

In the event of wildlife damage problems, your first call should be to the USDA Wildlife Services (formerly Animal Damage Control) office in Oklahoma City at 405-521-4040 or 4039.

Community Involvement

– You are Needed

Rural Oklahoma is in a state of change. In many areas, increasing numbers of people are moving to the countryside. This means an increasing demand to improve services. Rural trash collection systems, 911 emergency phone service, street signs to help direct emergency crews to rural locations, and funding for rural ambulance services are all examples of successful improvements that Cooperative Extension has helped implement throughout the state. As more people move to an area, the things that drew you to the countryside in the first place are at risk – things like nice scenery, clean creeks where kids can play, quiet evenings, and dark starry nights. With good will a community can arrive at constructive compromises between development and conservation.

Many rural communities have started voluntary watershed or conservation association groups that strive to preserve the quality of rural life. Seek them out – or start one up – and you may find neighbors who share your interests.

Rural development is a major function of your county's Cooperative Extension Service – ask how they can assist you in making your community better.

Call OKIE at 1-800-522-6543 before you dig. Power lines, natural gas lines, fiber optic lines, and other buried utilities can be lethal or extremely expensive to repair if you slice through them. They will mark the buried utility lines without charge.

Start Off on the Right Foot

Your local Cooperative Extension office offers many resources to help you learn how to succeed in rural living: fact sheets, websites, videotapes, workshops, newsletters, soil and water tests, and individual consultations. There are Extension professionals in your county working in these areas:

- Agriculture – crops, livestock, alternative agriculture, plus a wide range of natural resources areas like water quality, wildlife, range management, and forestry.
- Family and Consumer Education – parenting, health, housing, and home-based businesses are just a few of the issues covered.
- 4-H and Youth Development – leadership, natural resource and livestock projects, speech, public service, and fun!
- Rural Development – economic development, infrastructure development, technology transfer, county government, and more.

Some county Extension offices offer short courses helpful for people moving to the countryside. All of them should be able to provide advice on the many different sides of country life.

There are numerous other county, state, and federal agencies that can also be of help to rural residents. Your county Cooperative Extension educators can point you to these other agencies.

Local people can also be a source of information on local conditions and ways of doing things. Do not fall in love with a piece of property or an agricultural enterprise until you learn the special requirements, risks, and work required to produce a specific crop or kind of livestock. Visit several people who are doing it so you can benefit from different points of view.

Remember – keep an open mind, ask lots of questions, and then make up your mind.

Some Final Advice

- Consider renting somewhere in or close to your preferred area before you buy.
- Before jumping into any type of farming, get advice from Cooperative Extension, NRCS, and other sources in order to determine if your land is well suited, you have the needed time and skills, and the outlook for profitability is good.
- Keep your experiments small – try a ¼ acre of strawberries instead of 10 acres. If no one else is doing something, there is probably a good reason.
- Learn all you can before making any major change to your land like logging, land clearing, or major earthwork. Seek advice from neutral experts in a position to know the pros and cons of what you seek to do – Cooperative Extension, Natural Resources Conservation Service, or Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry - Forestry Services etc.
- Draw maps of your property based on aerial photos, soil surveys, and ecological site guides available from your local Natural Resources Conservation Service office. Maps let you get a better handle on how to maintain and improve your land. For example: plant cover types, water features, utility line and other easements, septic tank and lateral lines, existing and needed fences, and different soils and their limitations. Keep your maps in a three ring notebook together with any receipts for land and home improvements you make.
- Work with nature not against it – find the best uses for each part of your land.

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

Bringing the University to You!

The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state, and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
- It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
- Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
- It provides practical, problem-oriented education for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.
- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
- More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
- It dispenses no funds to the public.
- It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
- Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
- The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations, and the mass media.
- Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

Oklahoma State University, in compliance with Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 as amended, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and other federal laws and regulations, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, age, religion, disability, or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices, or procedures. This includes but is not limited to admissions, employment, financial aid, and educational services.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert E. Whitson, Director of Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President, Dean, and Director of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 42 cents per copy. 0410 TE Revised