

# NEIGHBORHOOD KNOW-HOW: Building community with rural neighbors

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Rural landowners, compared to city dwellers, have significantly more space between them and their nearest neighbors.

But a neighbor is still a neighbor – even when the distance between them is measured by miles instead of feet.

Small-acreage landowners with strong neighborhood connections can enjoy the best of both worlds: the security and friendships of being part of a community with the freedom and privacy a rural property provides. Having a sense of community in a rural neighborhood offers the enjoyable, safe, and peaceful lifestyle you wanted on your small acreage and can lead to greater enjoyment of the property.

Here are some of the benefits:

- Relationships among rural neighbors provide an increased sense of security. The solitude of living on a rural property can come with risks. Having the help and support of neighbors, especially in emergencies or times of distress, is a necessity for the safety of you and your property.
- Neighborly relationships may minimize conflicts. Small-acreage landowners in Wyoming have seemingly endless options for what they can do on their properties. Because of those vast options, what one landowner chooses to do might be drastically different than their neighbors. While different values and



uses of property could potentially fuel conflict, neighbors who respect and understand each other and what they value about their properties can reduce misunderstandings.

Building a sense of community doesn't happen by accident. Whether you've lived on your property for few weeks or a few decades, it's never too late to strengthen rural neighborhood connections.

Keep these principles in mind.

## **Principle #1: Communication**

The first principle of building community. The distance between neighbors may mean less face-to-face contact than if living in a town or city, so you may need to rely on alternatives when communicating for maintaining safety and building connections. Communicating on pertinent topics, while upholding everyone's right to privacy and peace, can readily make the neighborhood feel more neighborly.

- Set up a voluntary phone or email list so neighbors can readily reach each other across the miles. A neighbor might need to alert you to a disturbance on your property, or you may need their help in an emergency; if you don't know how to communicate with one another, you can't give or receive help.
- You could hold a neighborhood gathering to make those initial connections. This could coincide with a certain time of year or topic, like fire safety in forest-boundary communities or irrigation system updates in agricultural areas. While not all neighbors will participate, simply extending the invitation may be a neighborhood-building opportunity.

## **Principle #2: Neighbors Helping Neighbors**

The second principle of community building. Think about ways your rural neighborhood can embody the "barn raising" culture of the

not-so-distant past. Find ways to support a neighbor facing a challenge on their property.

- Lend a hand, a tool or a piece of equipment, or lend some advice and lessons learned from dealing with a similar issue. Bring a borrowed tool or piece of equipment back timely and in good condition; conversely, when lending something to a neighbor, communicate when you expect it returned and how you expect it used.
- If in an area prone to a seasonal natural event, like springtime flooding or winter snowfalls that lead to road closures, make a plan with the neighbors. This will assure everyone's safety by helping each other out.

### Principle #3: Respecting Boundaries

The old adage "Good fences make good neighbors" is even more accurate when replacing the word "fences" with "boundaries." Respecting boundaries is key to neighborhood relationships. What happens on your property may affect your neighbor and vice versa. While you might have an abundance of space and independence to enjoy on your rural property, you don't live in isolation.

- Letting weeds spread with abandon may set the stage for conflict. Weed management choices will inevitably have an impact on a neighbor's property. There are experts and resources from University of Wyoming Extension offices and your county's weed and pest office, among others, to help you make informed weed control decisions. Being proactive about weed management is in the best interest of your property and neighborhood harmony.
- You're not the only one who

enjoys the freedom of a small acreage; pets and livestock might get a taste for wide-open spaces. Letting them wander will set the stage for conflict. This is where the "good fences make good neighbors" saying can be taken literally. Maintain fences so pets and livestock are kept away from harm and away from a neighbor's property.

### Principle #4: Set an Example

The final principle of having a strong rural neighborhood is the simplest and perhaps most important. Be a good neighbor to have a good neighborhood. Set an example for how you would like others in your rural community to behave and interact.

- Be a role model by communicating with neighbors, respecting

others' privacy, keeping an eye out for neighbors' well-being, keeping weeds in check, and being friendly and generous whenever possible. Small, neighborly actions can make a big difference as it sets the right tone for others.

- Respect the way people want to be treated. Some rural residents want to build a stronger sense of community, while others genuinely want to be left alone! Watch out for each other, respect each other, and don't intrude.

Being part of a neighborhood isn't just for cities and towns – it's important in rural areas, too. Building a sense of community will allow you and your neighbors the chance to appreciate your small acreage to its fullest.

**Tara Kuipers** *doesn't wear a Mr. Rogers' sweater ALL the time nor does she have a neighborly television show for kids, but she is a University of Wyoming Extension community development educator. She can be reached at (307) 527-8560 or at [tkuipers@uwyo.edu](mailto:tkuipers@uwyo.edu).*

## DON'T MOVE FIREWOOD!



Firewood can carry insects and diseases that kill trees. Remember to always get firewood as close to your destination as possible. Burn firewood where you buy or gather it. Trees in towns and forests are threatened by native and exotic insects and diseases that can hitch a ride in a load of firewood. Let's keep forests healthy so we can continue to enjoy camping, hiking, hunting, and fishing. Brought to you by the Wyoming State Forestry Division in cooperation with the US Forest Service.