

# Land vs. livestock debate continues



## For Starters

By CHERRY BRIESER STOUT

As it is for many rural dwellers, living amidst farmland and open space is part of my family's lifestyle. It's one of those little pleasures of country life to see the sun rise and set every day on the surrounding fields.

So when a "for sale" sign recently went up in the cornfield next to our home, we didn't want to see things change.

We called the seller on the same day the sign went up and were disappointed to hear they were asking more than twice the market price for prime central Illinois farmland. We made what we thought was a reasonable offer.

In the ensuing weeks, several other offers were made by those in pursuit of the American dream to buy a place in the country. We also learned the sellers were in negotiations with a local developer interested in building up the property, which is near a subdivision of homes in the \$250,000 price range.

My husband and I debated how much we were willing to pay to keep rural sprawl from encroaching next door. The bargain hunter in me wanted to pay just enough to buy the property, but not \$1 more.

I shared my predicament with a friend, who suggested that we attempt to scare off the developer by telling him that we were planning to convert our horse barn into a hog-finishing unit.

I resisted the temptation to try the pig ploy and we decided to outbid the developer. We took out a loan with the local Farm Credit Services office and told the landowners we were ready to pay their price. Some things you do for peace of mind.

The story behind this small Macon County land purchase is just a blip on

Illinois' rural real estate scene, but it's also part of a big-picture struggle for land use in rural areas, including the economic and social challenges facing animal agriculture.

### Smart growth

Illinois is losing about 50,000 acres of agricultural land to development each year. A similar amount of land is being lost each year in Wisconsin, according to Fran O'Leary, the editor of *Prairie Farmer's* sister publication, *Wisconsin Agriculturalist*.

In her September issue, O'Leary writes about a new initiative by Wisconsin's ag secretary to come up with a "smart growth" solution to implement meaningful farmland preservation. The purpose is not to stop development in Wisconsin, but to control where it happens.

O'Leary also took part in a recent tour of East Coast states to learn about land-preservation efforts in a region that's been grappling with urban sprawl issues much longer than the Midwest. For example, Maryland helps fund rural land preservation with a general transfer tax on all land transfers and an agricultural conversion tax that generates more than \$300 million annually for agriculture and open-space conversion. Pennsylvania charges a 2-cents-per-pack tax on cigarettes to help fund land preservation.

Like Wisconsin, Illinois needs to consider smart growth strategies. For long-term growth, our agricultural economy depends on retaining prime farmland and maintaining a strong livestock industry.

A couple of years ago, Illinois Ag Director Chuck Hartke proposed the creation of livestock zones to help steer new livestock operations to counties where they best fit. Unfortunately, the livestock zone idea has yet to make it to the House or Senate. Like farmland preservation, the effort to create livestock zones faces challenges, including opposition from landowners that don't want limitations put on land.

You also have to appreciate the timing and efforts of the Illinois Livestock Development Group, which was created in 2003 by leading Illinois farm groups that decided to make animal agriculture their top priority. Don't miss our coverage about livestock's comeback in this issue.

Market forces are dictating many of Illinois' land and livestock trends. Farmland owners know they will get significantly more money if they sell land for nonagricultural use than for farm use. Land prices have risen so dramatically that producers find it increasingly hard to buy ground to farm. Rising land values are also a balance for the livestock industry. Cheap pasture is no longer cheap.

The issues of land use are complex and divisive, but it seems likely that we'll continue to see lots of prime farmland swallowed up by houses and concrete unless we start talking and planning for smart growth.

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## Grower Files

Steve Ludwig,  
Danville producer



# Seed partnership offers top benefit for Illinois grower

Steve Ludwig likes the partnership he has with his crop specialist from Illini FS in Urbana and the benefits it brings his farming operation.

Ludwig farms 2,200 acres of corn and soybeans near Danville in east-central Illinois. He counts on FS crop specialist Robert Bennett to help keep his operation running smoothly.

"He brings a selection of hybrids, and we talk about them and what will work best for me," Ludwig says. "He knows my fields. And he knows the hybrids and traits better than I do."

But it's more than just seed. Ludwig says he is able to get a total package through FS, including seed plus fertilizer, crop protection, scouting and advice, and much more thanks to his FS crop specialist.

"Not only does it have an agronomic effect, it has an economic effect as well," Ludwig says. "I can get everything I need in one place, instead of trying to piece together a package with seed from this company, fertilizer from that company, chemicals from another company. It's a bonus to have everything together."

The FS total package starts with the basics by having everything Ludwig wants in seed: high-yielding, consistent seed that has a complete package of good health.

FS corn seed brings the good root system and strong stalks Ludwig needs to have a healthy crop through harvest. About 50% of the seed he planted this year was FS corn seed. "I've been very pleased with the rootworm corn," Ludwig says. "And two of the FS corn numbers were my highest yields of all last year."

He plants 100% FS HiSOY soybean seed because it brings pest and disease protection that targets soybean cyst nematode, sudden death syndrome and phytophthora, which is an ongoing problem Ludwig and Bennett are working together to solve.

"We've made good progress against phytophthora," Ludwig says. "It showed up in July this year. We walked the field, took samples and sent them to the lab to try to get an accurate diagnosis. My FS crop specialist put a lot of work into that."

Ludwig summarizes the benefits by noting the FS system offers a good quality product with high yields, good support through the crop specialists and a diversity of genetics to meet his needs.

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## Letters

### Out-of-pocket health costs

I took particular interest in Susan Hayhurst's article on health insurance in the July issue ("Lessons learned on insurance hunt," Page 33). Her points were well-written regarding the deductibility of health insurance premiums. What is typically missing in such articles is how to also deduct the out-of-pocket medical expenses. For example, 125 plans for businesses with multiple employees and 105 plans for the sole proprietor are vehicles our firm uses to help cope with the high costs of medical expenses. Also, HSAs are becoming a popular tool.

Bill Stahler, CPA

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