

Where the Blacktop Ends: Promising Developments at the Intersection of Agricultural Production and Urban Living



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With the Trump administration's rollback of federal regulations proceeding at a steady pace, and with new federal tax policy firmly established, and with the next federal Farm Bill promised by year's end, Arkansas's farmers would be forgiven for thinking that nothing new was percolating up from the state level (let's forget about dicamba for a few days).

However, two recent developments at the state level offer an opportunity for Arkansas's agricultural producers and some potential relief for the state's city dwellers.

First, in January the Arkansas Pollution Control & Ecology Commission approved the initiation of rulemaking on a proposed nutrient water quality trading regulation. Farmers are well aware that nutrients and water quality present an increasingly tense conversation given the scrutiny of the Chesapeake Bay, the dismissed but unresolved *Des Moines Waterworks* litigation, and the ever-present Gulf hypoxic zone. Enter nutrient trading. The proposed Arkansas Nutrient Water Quality Trading Regulation is entirely voluntary and is described by supporters as a market-based tool to achieve water quality goals with greater efficiency and cost savings.

Burdened with the potential of tighter nutrient limits in discharge permits or restrictions on expanded capacity, several Northwest Arkansas municipalities face critical challenges along the path toward greater reductions in nutrients. Therefore, the cities are collectively pressing forward under a 2015 law that authorized nutrient trading as a less costly compliance mechanism that would also reduce nutrient loading, particular from the farm sector.

In its simplest form, the regulation authorizes the development and implementation of nutrient reduction projects such as buffer strips, streambank restoration, and nutrient management plans to generate nutrient credits for sale to municipal wastewater facilities. In turn, the municipal utilities could utilize the credits to satisfy tightening permit limits or to affect an expansion of capacity.

The devil will lie in the details of each proposed project. However, the draft regulation remains flexible enough to (1) generate conservation strategies (and revenue) on the farm, (2) lower compliance costs in town, and (3) improve water quality. This represents a potential win-win-win for Arkansas and a bridge to increased urban/rural collaboration.

Next, February saw the release of the Arkansas Voluntary Smoke Management Guidelines for Row Crop Burning. Row crop burning is an efficient tool for farmers to manage residue, curtail pests and diseases,

and prepare ground for the next growing season. For residents in the region, smoke from the burning offers health concerns.

The smoke management guidelines are entirely voluntary. Equally important, they are easy to use. The guidelines ask farmers to call the Arkansas Agricultural Department Dispatch Center prior to burning in order to provide: (1) the location of the fire, (2) the number of acres to be burned, and (3) the fuel type (e.g., rice, corn, wheat). Based on location, weather conditions and the estimated distance to nearby smoke sensitive areas, such as urban centers, airports, schools, and hospitals, the dispatcher will provide a recommendation to burn, delay burning, or reduce the number of acres.

This is just a tool. But for farmers, it also continues their dedication to stewardship and to being a good neighbor.

For the rest of us, these examples are evidence that rural farmers and city residents are not so far apart on all the issues. I think it is fitting that clean water and clean air should unite us. We all share it. We all depend on it.