

Poultry farms split neighbors

Plans for 1,000 houses raise concern for area's

watershed By [Stephen Steed](#)

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PHOTO BY ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Map showing the location of Evening Shade

EVENING SHADE -- Tempers flared Tuesday night in Evening Shade, putting the Sharp County town of 432 at odds with the largely idyllic setting of the television sit-com of the same name, with its real-life residents debating the growth of the poultry industry in the area.

The expansion of operations in Batesville, Pocahontas and Corning by Ozark Mountain Poultry and Peco Foods calls for construction of some 1,000 poultry houses in about five counties within the watersheds of the Strawberry, Spring and Eleven-Point rivers.

Until the issue moves into the federal courts -- or to other towns -- Evening Shade is at the forefront of the debate.

To some, the expansion means jobs, even new careers.

Others see a threat to their streams and water wells, and point to the Illinois River and other Northwest Arkansas streams that have high levels of phosphorus and nitrates as examples of what they don't want to see happen in their area.

"I want to welcome all of you, from both sides of the issue," Curtis Middleton, the organizer of what he termed "a public service meeting," said early in the evening, when it wasn't yet apparent there were two factions in the crowd of about 100 lining the bleachers and taking up folding chairs courtside of Burt Reynolds Gymnasium/Linda Bloodworth Thomason and Harry Thomason Auditorium.

Middleton, an Evening Shade resident since 2005, is founder of the Arkansas Rights Coalition, a nonprofit started in July 2015 after Middleton discovered that neighbor Jerry Tracy was planning to build six poultry houses to grow about 182,000 birds per batch.

Middleton's group said in August that it intended to sue the federal Small Business Administration, the U.S. Farm Service Agency, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service -- alleging that they failed to conduct an adequate environmental study of the poultry operations' impact on wildlife, air quality, natural resources and on six specific threatened or endangered species of bats and mussels, and one plant.

Middleton, an environmental consultant, built a two-story plantation-style home deep into a picturesque valley, about 8 miles of gravel and dirt roads west of Evening Shade. Tracy has a small home atop a hill on about 120 acres a half-mile north of Middleton's place.

A nearby farmer who works for one of the two poultry companies said, "I feel like I'm caught right in between -- both ways -- in where I live and where I work." He asked not to be identified. Several other people in town shooed away a reporter -- in a friendly way -- a few hours before the start of the meeting. "I don't have many friends, and I don't want to lose the few I got," one said.

Community at odds

"We are not against the farmers or the poultry producers," Middleton told the crowd. "We are against the bad practices followed by state and federal agencies."

The crowd mostly sat silent through the addresses of the night's featured speakers: John Ikerd, a retired professor of agriculture economics at the University of Missouri; and Terry Spence, a consultant and farmer from northeast Missouri. Now aligned with various environmental and social-justice groups, both have long fought against industrial agriculture and large, concentrated animal farms.

"You have a powerful situation brewing here, with your clean air and clean water, while you still have it," said Spence, who became an activist when a meat processor put 80,000 head of cattle within three-quarters of a mile of his farm near the Missouri-Iowa border.

Farmers, especially young ones, will rue the day they signed their contracts, Spence said. Aside from initial indebtedness in which the average poultry house costs \$300,000 to build, they will be financially responsible for upgrades deemed necessary by the poultry company and could be held liable for any environmental damage, he said.

Within an hour, the meeting devolved into shouting from the bleachers.

"It's only the lazy that are hungry," one man yelled, after Ikerd lamented the number of people who are "food-insecure."

"We were feeding people just fine before Obama and Hillary came along," another shouted.

Another tried to calm the crowd. "We have to co-exist, but it's not right for the state of Arkansas or the federal government to allow someone to put a chicken house within a hundred yards of my home," the man said.

"If I own that land, I can do whatever the hell I want with it," another responded.

A Cave City police officer asked a particularly agitated section of the crowd to calm down, to little effect.

"Some time back, things got tough," one woman shouted. "I didn't want a chicken house next-door to me, but we almost became chicken farmers. You got to make a living."

She also said she thought that the naming of the proposed Tracy farm by Middleton and another supporter, Paul Hinson, in a possible lawsuit against the three federal agencies pits "two families against one" and was engulfing the rest of the community.

"We're not here to be against the farmer," Hinson said. "But we are here to be good stewards of our community and of our land."

Not long before the amplifier was turned off and the meeting came to a fairly subdued end, Ikerd, in a breaking voice, said, "I don't know one instance where this kind of controversy hasn't ripped a community apart, and I can see it happening here right now."

Job prospects

Evening Shade has long relied on and made some money from *Evening Shade*, the television series. The show ran from September 1990 to May 1994. Burt Reynolds starred and the Thomasons, both native Arkansans, produced the series.

During that time, the Evening Shade School Foundation sold enough *Evening Shade Cookbooks* to build the Reynolds/Thomason facility, dedicated in 1993. Now owned by the Cave City School District, which is where Evening Shade kids have gone to school since a consolidation several years ago, the facility is leased for dances, concerts, holiday events and meetings.

"This area -- Sharp County -- is so poor, and it desperately needs jobs," Cave City Superintendent Steven Green said. He was unable to attend Tuesday's meeting because his school was hosting a donkey basketball game. "Maybe these poultry houses will create a few," he said. "But I know there has to be a balance. Our good water is one of our best resources."

Peco Foods Inc., based in Alabama, and Ozark Mountain Poultry, based in Rogers, have announced expansion plans for northeast Arkansas. Peco said it would spend \$165 million on its processing plant in Pocahontas and feed mill in Corning (Clay County), creating 1,000 jobs. Both companies also have plants in Batesville, about 30 miles south of Evening Shade.

Peco said it would need a network of nearly 600 growers, primarily of broilers, to service its growth. Ozark Mountain Poultry has said it will need about 400 growers as it expands in Batesville and in Magness (Independence County) with a \$25 million feed mill. Both companies are eligible for various tax breaks and incentives from the state.

Unemployment in several counties in the area neared or surpassed double digits in 2014, when some of the expansion plans were first announced. Unemployment rates were 12.2 percent in Clay County, 9.3 percent in Randolph County, 9.4 percent in Sharp County, 8.3 percent in Independence County. The state average was 7.4 percent in March 2014.

The statewide unemployment rate in September was 4 percent. The average in those counties is a tick above, at 4.1 percent.

By the numbers

If 1,000 poultry houses sounds like a lot, "it's not even close" to the numbers in Washington and Benton counties, the state's top two poultry producers, said Marvin Childers, president of the Poultry Federation of Arkansas, Missouri and Oklahoma.

Those two counties accounted for 822 of the state's 5,895 poultry-related farms, according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture. About 300 of the farms were in the broiler business. If each farm had five poultry houses, the two counties would have a combined 1,500 broiler houses.

"That's the point," said Middleton. "We're looking at many, many times the number of poultry houses we have now. Multiply the effects of a thousand of them in a short period of time. But, again, we're not against the farmer. We just want the government to do what it's supposed to do."

Sharp County had 32 broiler houses; Independence County, 28; Randolph County, 28, according to the 2012 Agriculture Census.

Tracy, the Evening Shade farmer, was among those who shouted from the stands at the meeting. After the meeting, he was a little sheepish, admitting that he and friends "got a little emotional."

Still, he said, he took the night's meeting personally.

He teaches diesel mechanics at Arkansas State University at Newport. "I just want to stay home, run a business and watch my kids grow up. Now, what's wrong with that?" Tracy, 46, said.

His contract for six houses, if built, is with Ozark Mountain Poultry. He said he was confident that the poultry industry in general and Ozark Mountain, in particular, have improved on their technologies enough that environmental problems like those seen in Northwest Arkansas won't occur a couple of hundred miles to the east.

Angie Haley, 42, said she hopes that's the case.

"We're really proud of our water," Haley, a member of the Evening Shade City Council and the town's librarian, said a few hours before the meeting.

The water is fresh and pure, from a deep and bountiful spring just east of town, she said. While water is piped in to the 300 or so customers of the Evening Shade Water Department, it's also available right from the spigot near its spring.

"We don't want to lose that," she said.

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