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## DEVELOPMENT

# Newcomers, farmers make odd neighbors in South Dade

**Some homeowners lured to South Miami-Dade have discovered living near farmland can be far from peaceful.**

By Tere Figueras Negrete

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Eddy Calero put down roots in South Miami-Dade three years ago, lured by a still reasonable real estate market and the prospect of swapping Kendall's stop-and-go traffic for a less harried commute through pastoral farmland.

But he didn't count on the sluggish tractors that sometimes clog the only road from his subdivision to the turnpike at inopportune moments -- like when he and his neighbors are heading to work.

Nor did he factor in the dust, which cast a cloud over a nephew's recent birthday party at a neighborhood park. Machinery readying a nearby field for planting sprayed the festivities with misty waves of soil.

"Who would've thought they would be working on a Saturday?" said Calero, 30, an architect.

The housing boom that brought Calero and thousands like him to South Miami-Dade has made unlikely neighbors of farmers and these suburban transplants -- some of whom are discovering that living so close to Miami-Dade County's agricultural industry can be far from bucolic.

Complaints about farming activities -- some legitimate, some not -- are increasing as more people move in, prompting the county's agricultural director to draft brochures that will outline the sometimes unpleasant particulars of living close to a bustling, billion-dollar industry.

"They get here and it's a wake-up call," said Charles LaPradd, the county's agricultural manager. "The ag industry is dirty, dusty, loud, noisy and 24 hours a day."

He plans to distribute the brochures to real estate agencies and other businesses that might reach potential buyers.

Standing in a field of knee-high sweet corn, John Alger ticks off a list of farming chores he is sure will inevitably annoy his soon-to-be neighbors: noisy pumps chugging through the night; irrigation spray misting the sides of homes; the unmistakable perfume of fertilizer wafting over backyards.

"We don't make great neighbors," said Alger, eyeing a new crop of single-family houses under construction along one of his fields near the Homestead Miami Speedway. "We'd like to be, but that's not how it works."

Enforcement officers at Team Metro's South District, which stretches from Southwest 184th Street to the county line, are fielding more complaints about agricultural activities - even as the actual acreage of land farmed has shrunk.

### **MORE DEVELOPMENT**

During South Dade's housing boom, the number of agricultural acres in the county fell by an average of 1,800-plus each year -- from 80,237 in 2000 to 68,918 in 2006. Much of the agricultural land was replaced with residential development, according to Miami-Dade's Planning and Zoning Department.

"As more people move in with development, we're getting more calls," said Leon Cristiano, Team Metro's South District director.

He said the office dealt with only a handful of similar complaints before the housing boom. In 2006, he estimated, the number topped 300 -- a relatively small slice of the office's caseload, but one that can take up plenty of time.

Just driving out to a routine inspection on the far fringes of the county can take hours. And then there are the tasks that would vex even Dr. Dolittle: An anonymous complaint about a noisy and overpopulated chicken coop meant an unusual house call to make sure the owner was adhering to the 99-chicken limit outlined by code -- he wasn't.

"Chickens and roosters move around," Cristiano said. "It's not that easy to do a head count."

### **FARMING PROTECTIONS**

Normal agricultural activity is protected under Florida's Right to Farm Act, created to protect farmers near urbanized areas from nuisance lawsuits. Some farmers have taken to posting metal signs, purchased from the Dade County Farm Bureau, that warn of "odors, noises, spraying and insects" and advise prospective buyers interested in settling nearby to "take this into consideration."

Newlyweds Sal and Jessica Benchetrit were eager to snap up their two-story townhome in the sprawling Keys Gate development in Homestead two years ago.

"This felt like the last frontier," said Sal Benchetrit, who was raised in Kendall and charmed by the fruit groves in South Dade.

Not so charming, though, was a chalky film that would coat his black Toyota 4-Runner, mystifying him at first.

"It would be fine, and the next day it would be covered by this white soot," said Benchetrit, who realized the mystery dust was from mineral deposits and caused by spraying at nearby fields.

The county requires sellers to provide a disclosure -- warning of potential bothers such as livestock, pesticides and large machinery -- to new buyers purchasing property in or adjacent to agricultural land. The disclosure wouldn't apply to homeowners such as Calero and the Benchetrits, whose homes are tucked into large developments and don't directly abut farmland.

Not that the disclosure would have changed their minds.

"When you think about the price, getting stuck behind a tractor or some dust is not that bad," said Calero, who, like the Benchetrits, paid less than \$200,000 for his four-bedroom home.

With new homes continuing to sprout alongside his fields, Alger -- whose family has been farming in the area since 1934 -- is pragmatic about the changes that have come to South Dade.

"This is not the cozy little town that I grew up in," Alger said. "But this is where people want to be, and this is where there is still land that people can buy."

The small-town feel may be a thing of the past, but Alger and other long-timers say newcomers would be wise to brush up on neighborly etiquette -- such as staying off his fields. On a recent weekend, Alger lost several hundred dollars' worth of produce after ATV riders drove in loops across his field, trampling cornrows.

## **DANGER ON ROADS**

Another, potentially dangerous, faux pas: motorists who cut off farm equipment, especially heavy machinery like tractors, and drive aggressively near horses.

In November, a horse was killed and its rider badly injured after a sport utility vehicle struck them while driving down a Redland road. The case is pending, Miami-Dade police said.

More homes will likely bring even more complaints, said Francie Boellard, head of code compliance for Team Metro's South District.

Aiming her county-issued Ford sedan north along a rural stretch of road, Boellard slows down to point out a pair of roadside signs: The first announces "Hay for Sale." The second advertises "Custom Built Houses" coming soon. The full-color poster depicts a Spanish-style manse complete with barrel-tiled turrets.

"Where else but here are you going to see something like that?" Boellard said. "And I bet as soon as those new people come in, some of them are going to start complaining."



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**HARD ROW TO HOE:** Trucks drive near John Alger's cornrows in Homestead.



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**COLLISION:** John Alger's cornrows are alongside rows of new houses, in the background.



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ODORS, NOISES, SPRAYING: A sign in the Redland warns newcomers of potential farmland problems.