

# Urban livestock agriculture in the State of New Jersey, USA

**Urban livestock agriculture (ULA) in the USA is a constructive, yet largely unknown, underground, and unevenly regulated activity. Livestock encompasses multiple meanings for practitioners in the urban environments: economic buttress, tradition, cultural and/or religious endurance, and community cohesiveness. Research on and policy development for urban livestock (as for community food security generally) is lacking and needed. However, because livestock in the city is kept under diverse legal, illegal, and quasi-legal conditions, and because practitioners tend not to be part of the dominant culture, care must be taken to raise the issues under circumstances of support. It is argued here that issues of invisibility, distrust, and/or animosity between regulators and practitioners of urban livestock are founded more in the lack of attention paid by policy makers to food systems and food security generally than in insurmountable challenges of urban livestock as a positive urban land use.**

**W**hile urban livestock is recognized in the “hemispheric South”, in the “hemispheric North” it exists as largely unpaid labour for food production, and is undocumented. In the older industrial cities in the State of New Jersey, some neighbourhoods retain an ULA infrastructure. Successive waves of immigrants from all over the world, as well as from rural set-

## Little has been written about urban livestock in the USA

tings in the USA, have brought the knowledge and sometimes the practices of keeping rabbits, chickens, and occasionally goats and other animals for domestic use.

Little has been written about urban livestock in the USA. When referred to in newspapers it is in terms of nuisance, disease, or culture clash (e.g. immigrants bring “unbefitting” practices). They personify how it is perceived in

mainstream USA: marginal, primitive, dangerous, and dirty. There are, however, opportunities as well as barriers to urban livestock (see Table 1).

Learning about and promoting livestock in urban USA begins with recognition of the compromised legal and social conditions under which it most often exists. Because the practice is often illegal or quasi-illegal, practitioners are justly reluctant to talk with “outsiders”. Because recent immigrants compose a large portion of the practitioners, “outsider-insid-

er” status is marked by some combination of ethnicity, race, language, visa status, residential neighbourhood, class, and family structure. These markers represent powerful barriers in small towns and large cities alike and help to clarify why a practice like urban livestock can flourish and yet remain invisible.

## CASE STUDY: MIDDLESEX COUNTY, NEW JERSEY

In the East Coast State of New Jersey, there is tremendous discontinuity in urban livestock-related regulations. An example are the 25 contiguous municipalities in Middlesex County. The County lies across from Staten Island, a borough of New York City. Land use varies between high-density urban space and landscape that has been losing its small farm character to suburban sprawl over the last 20-40 years. According to standards being established within urban agriculture literature, Middlesex County would qualify as urban or peri-urban (UNDP, 1996:100-101; Mougeot, 2000:6).

Anne C. Bellows, Verdie Robinson,  
Jennifer Guthrie, Troels Meyer, Natalie Peric  
and Michael W. Hamm  
Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA  
✉ [acbellow@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:acbellow@rci.rutgers.edu)



Photo by V. Robinson

Outbuildings in residential neighbourhood of Perth Amboy, NJ originally designed for urban livestock.

**Table 1. Barriers and Opportunities for Urban Livestock Agriculture in USA Urban Environments (with reference to New Jersey)**

Barriers	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little, unknown, and/or illegal experience in, which make research difficult.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survives because of economic need, cultural endurance, and social resistance.</li> <li>• Fungible resource practice.</li> <li>• Fresher and tastier meat produced.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little existing professional or popular literature on urban livestock practice in North America.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical and growing literature in other countries, especially in the "South."</li> <li>• Immigrant and rural migrant communities bring experience to the U.S.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disparate and un-coordinated legal codes at municipal level on urban livestock.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local dialogue between practitioners and regulators can proceed in tandem with new developments at international level.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Space restrictions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small, space tolerant species like fish, guinea pigs, rabbits, and chickens.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate knowledge and/or unsafe (e.g. unsanitary) practices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technical training; workshops; community engagement in urban livestock.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural resistance to raising animals for food and other economic purpose.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community-wide food systems education</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often practiced by less elite groups and regulated by more elite groups.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community dialogue on food security needs.</li> </ul>

Interviews with practitioners indicate that urban livestock can be an economically sound way to increase families' protein consumption, especially in low-income households. These claims were tested with a four-stage hypothetical model that measures the costs of household meat consumption (chicken only) from both household production and retail market food sources. The results should be re-tested, but they hypothetically confirm the economic viability of ULA.

The findings were grouped into three categories of municipal regulation in Middlesex County. In the first category, municipal code exists to specifically prohibit urban livestock (3 municipalities). In the second category, municipal code exists in various forms to allow some forms of urban livestock (12 municipalities). In some cases, urban livestock is permitted specifically on agriculturally zoned land, but might or might not be allowed on residential land. In the third category, no municipal code regulates urban livestock in residential areas (10 municipalities).

Urban livestock is rare enough not to have pro-active regulation. In other words, intervention generally takes place in response to complaints, usually of noise, smell, neglect, or animal litter. In the absence of clear codes, regulation by zoning, health, or animal control officers takes place according to local custom and available expertise.

Most often, social reasons instigate regulation and enforcement, while official code violations justify the charges. The official reasons are violations of urban livestock code, if existing, or of nuisance laws, if no codes are available, e.g., noise, smell, neglect, etc. Yet, the officers described two groups of unofficial social conditions that motivate the official complaints. The first represents "cultural clash", where complaints are registered by one ethnic group against another. Members of the same cultural group, especially low income or "visa-vulnerable" groups, rarely lodge complaints against someone in the same group, even if they disapprove of the practice. The second complaint group originates from

higher income residents who are worried that urban livestock in their neighbourhood drives property values down. This group registers complaints against "insiders" and "outsiders" alike.

Regulation of urban livestock is viewed by practitioners as an institutional tool to eradicate them - *the residents* - from the gentrifying neighbourhoods because of their class, race, and ethnicity rather than a practice to remove urban livestock, per

## Urban livestock can be an economically sound way to increase protein consumption

se. ULA practice not only helps practitioners economically, but also in terms of social and cultural identity, and stronger presence vis-à-vis more elite groups in a municipality.

### BRIDGING INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND LOCAL DIVERSITY

The growing international awareness of urban livestock experience and related literature offer much technical, theoretical, and practical policy development strategies. A small but dynamic US movement promoting community food security, provides an ideal opening to address ULA at the educational, policy, activist, and research levels. Increasing information on plant-based and livestock urban agriculture augments the opportunity to build constructive dialogue on community development and food security that can bring together urban policy makers and residents who, until now, have had little interaction.

#### REFERENCES

- Mercia, S. Leonard. 1990. Raising Poultry the Modern Way. Vermont: Garden Way.
- Mougeot, Luc J. A. 2000. "Concepts and Definitions." Urban Agriculture Magazine. 1(1).
- United Nations Development Programme. 1996. Urban Agriculture: Food, Jobs and Sustainable Cities. United Nations Development Programme, Publication Series for Habitat II (Istanbul, June 1996), Vol. One. New York: UNDP.