



*Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service*

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## Country Living Overview

This primer is designed to help prospective buyers make informed decisions about purchasing a home or home site in rural Kansas. It can also be a resource or reference for those new to country living. The local K-State Research and Extension office is also an important local resource for more information about topics related to living in the country. Extension agents can answer questions, provide referrals to specialists, and recommend extension publications for more in-depth information. Most extension publications are also available online at [www.oznet.ksu.edu/library](http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library).

**Cover photo:** View from the Signal Oak of the Wakarusa Valley in Douglas County by John Charlton, Kansas Geological Survey



Photo by Carol Blocksome

Scenic vistas, such as these sumac-colored hills in Riley County, are one of the attractions of country life.

The quiet and serenity of country living is a wonderful experience when expectations are realistic. However, reality often does not measure up to the romanticized version of almost any idea or ideal – as is frequently discovered following a move from an urban setting to the country. Often the intention to “get away from it all and enjoy a simple country life” meets the reality that services taken for granted in the city are not as readily available in rural areas. It is important to understand – before buying – that living in a rural area can be quite different than living in a city.

Some people consider the country to be a more wholesome environment for raising children.

While a country location provides an abundance of opportunities for children to roam and explore nature in an atmosphere far removed from urban trappings, child rearing, too, brings a set of parental supervision challenges and the need for new and different safety rules for parents and children. A move from the city to the country creates a set of challenges, responsibilities, chores, and in some cases, extra expenses. For many people vehicle expense is second only to the cost of housing. Be sure to consider travel costs when planning to live in the country. Online cost calculators are available at [www.edmunds.com/apps/cto/CTOintroController](http://www.edmunds.com/apps/cto/CTOintroController) or [www.bikesatwork.com/carfree/cost-of-carownership.html](http://www.bikesatwork.com/carfree/cost-of-carownership.html).

## Rewards and Considerations for Living in the Country

Perceived Rewards	Considerations and Potential Risks
More personal freedom; fewer or no rules, covenants, restrictions, etc.	The same freedoms apply to neighbors, meaning few or no restrictions on activities of living nearby. Must be self-reliant; some people may feel less secure.
Potential for reduced cost of living.	Total cost of housing, insurance, and utilities might increase; transportation time and cost dependent on distance. Potential to decrease food costs by growing vegetables, fruits, livestock. Owner must maintain driveway, buildings, drainage, fences, etc.
Property taxes may be lower.	Services are not as available; some services – such as fire protection and road maintenance – may be limited; others, such as wastewater, are the homeowner’s responsibility.
Open space, solitude; rural scenery.	Fewer neighbors; isolated; separated from friends: No “block parties,” less “going next door for a cup of sugar.” Some communities are so close-knit that introductions and inclusion may be difficult.
Pristine environment, clean air, pure water, dark nights.	Livestock and cropping cause odors, dust, and water contamination; weather conditions may seem harsher and cause more damage, mild to extreme light pollution; nighttime lights may annoy.
Peaceful, quiet; away from the “hustle and bustle”; reduced stress.	Agricultural equipment, livestock, and hunting seasons can be noisy and hours of operation may be long. Must keep fuel in vehicles. Scheduling activities away from home requires planning, especially when vehicles and driving privileges are limited for some family members (school, meetings, recreation, jobs, church, etc.); no “quick run” to the grocery or the hardware store; need to plan and prepare to get home with frozen, cold, or hot foods.
Opportunity to produce and store own food and/or raise livestock.	May need to learn skills such as gardening, how to feed livestock, food preservation techniques, food safety procedures; time and monetary investment required for food production.
More opportunity to view wildlife in its natural habitat.	Wild animals may be pests, health, or safety problems; they can also injure or kill pets.
Wide open space for children to play and roam.	Supervision of children may require more and different rules and safety controls than in an urban setting, including hazard recognition (such as how to interact with wild animals, pond and stream safety, etc.).

Because owning land or a home in the country is an event that is often planned years in advance, potential buyers should do ample research before buying. Some people may find renting to be prudent before committing to buying or building. Know what to expect and learn what to look for. Country living can be frustrating for those who are unprepared. Use this publication for guidance. In addition to brief discussions of considerations, it provides suggestions, essential contacts, and references to help with decision-making. Use the table on pages 14-16 to fill in information about local contacts as you research country living.

### Government

Kansas counties are governed by a publicly-elected board of county commissioners. County governance is often further divided into townships and special districts, with governing boards also elected by the public. Township boards are primarily responsible for repair and maintenance of roads and bridges in their jurisdiction that are not maintained by the county or state. Township budgets are provided by the county from taxes collected on real property in the township. For reference, land survey townships are 36 square miles, but the size of county townships often varies.

Special districts may overlap county and township boundaries. Districts provide special services such as schools, cemeteries, hospitals, and libraries. Kansas has more governmental units than most states.

**Taxes.** In Kansas, property taxes provide the majority of revenue for local governments. In some counties, a county wide sales tax supplements property tax revenue. County taxes fund the budget that provides services such as road and bridge construction, maintenance, and repair; ambulance and 911 services; the county sheriff’s office; juvenile and adult detention facilities;



Photo by Morgan Powell



Photo by John Charlton, KGS



Photo by Carol Bloksome

Roads in rural Kansas can range from smooth, well-marked two-lane highways (left) to gravel county roads (center) to dirt tracks (right). Road conditions depend on weather and maintenance. A gravel or dirt road that is easily passable in dry weather can become hazardous after a little rain, snow, or ice. Even paved roads deteriorate after winter's freezing, thawing, and salt treatment.

county offices; the local health department; mental health services; cemetery and library districts; and services for the elderly.

In the city, services are more readily available because municipalities add user fees to the base county taxes for services provided within the city limits. A comparable home outside city limits will be taxed at a different rate.

County tax rates vary widely in Kansas – ranging from about 20 mills to 100 mills. In addition, mill levies vary between and within townships because of district assessments. Check with the county treasurer for accurate information about the tax rate for a particular property or to compare properties.

### Access

Access to property via driveway must conform to county and township guidelines. The county public works department or a township official must authorize the location of a driveway entrance and culvert off a public road before construction. Factors such as road surface, traffic

load, and drainage are considered. The landowner may be required to place the driveway in a location less favored by the owner. Culvert size is usually specified by the jurisdiction, based on expected water volume in the ditch during rainfall runoff. The landowner may be required to pay for culvert acquisition and installation. In most cases, the landowner is responsible for all maintenance of a private drive, including snow removal, grading, gravel application, and dust control. If the property does not join a public road the landowner must record with the county register of deeds details of the access easement with adjoining property owners.

**Roads.** Most rural property is accessed by county or township roads. Rural roads usually have less traffic than urban streets and highways, but may also receive less maintenance. Funds to maintain rural roads come primarily from county property taxes. Actual maintenance is done by the county or township. Townships have limited budgets for road work and repair. For assistance with road issues, contact a town-

ship trustee. The county clerk maintains records of the township officers.

County and township road surfaces can be hard (paved), improved (gravel, rock, etc.), and unimproved (dirt, sand). Some roads may be designated low-maintenance by the county, meaning there will be no grading or snow removal.

Rural roads rarely have the amenities found in urban/suburban settings such as wide lanes, curbs and guttering, striping, or lighting and may require different driving techniques. Loose or flying gravel damages vehicle paint, causes body dings, and cracks windshields. Expect an increase in vehicle maintenance costs from faster tire wear, more flats, and more frequent front-end alignments. Gravel, dirt, and sand roads generate dust, which will permeate vehicles and nearby homes. Counties may offer an option to treat portions of a road to control dust – typically at the landowner's expense.

Not all rural roads have stop signs, yield signs, or railroad crossing lights. Some roads and bridges are narrow and may have weight restric-

tions. Construction equipment and large vehicles (including moving vans) may not be able to negotiate some areas. Wide, slow-moving farm vehicles and equipment travel rural roads to get to fields and may interrupt traffic flow or hinder road access. Allow extra time to accommodate unpredictable traffic conditions on rural roads.

Kansas weather takes a toll on rural roads. Some will be impassable when it rains because of mud and/or flooding. Unpaved roads become slippery and even impassable when wet. Cars will not stay clean! In the summer, heat-softened oil-and-chip road surfaces splatter tar. In winter drifting snow may close roads and create serious travel hazards. Depending on the amount of drifting, it could be days before all roads are cleared. Freezing rain also creates hazardous driving conditions, since few townships budget for widespread use of surface treatments. Contact the county public works department or township for information about the extent of road maintenance to expect.

**School Buses.** School buses can generally reach most rural homes, but children may need to walk to a pickup site. Bus rides to school can be long. In Kansas, school transportation supervisors are encouraged to make every effort to plan routes that will not require students to be on the bus for more than an hour; however this is not a mandate. Each school district office has information about bus routes and travel times. A directory of Kansas unified school districts can be found on the Kansas Department of Education Web site [www.ksde.org](http://www.ksde.org). Look under the “Directories” link.

## Legal Matters

**Codes.** Codes vary by county but usually include environmental requirements, and may

also include animal control and kennel codes. Cities usually enforce building codes to ensure that structures and components meet minimum standards. This assures a level of safety and conformity to uniform standards for adjacent homes in town that may not exist in a rural setting. Each county’s government office has information about building codes and their enforcement in that county. Although many counties recommend that construction conform to the Uniform Building, Plumbing, and Electrical Codes, few Kansas counties inspect contractors’ work to assure compliance. A poorly built or remodeled home could turn a country dream into a nightmare. Thoroughly check contractors’ references before building or buying.

**Easements and Rights of Way.** Not all property can have a home or building put on it. Check with the appropriate county offices (planning and zoning, environmental services, etc) before purchasing land to make sure the property being considered is suitable for building. An easement may allow utility companies or others to dig, trench, or install roads, water, sewer, electrical, or telephone lines across privately-owned property. Typically no permanent structures can be built on an easement. Find out what easements are recorded before buying.

**Leases.** A lease is a binding contract for exclusive possession of land for a specific period of time. Previous owners may have leased their land to someone else. Before purchasing land it is a good idea to learn from the seller if any leases are in effect. Leasing gives someone the right to use land without owning it. Some leases are oral arrangements; others are written documents. Oral and written leases are

legally enforceable in Kansas. With an oral lease agreement, certain provisions in Kansas statutes automatically become part of the lease by implication. When land that is being leased is sold, the lessee (or tenant) has a legal right to continue to use the land until the lease expires. The notice to terminate must be in writing even if the lease agreement is oral.

**Mineral Rights.** Mineral rights are the legal right to extract minerals such as oil, gas, coal and other solid minerals from a property. These rights can be held separately from the title to the land. Oil and gas exploration and removal can create quite a disturbance on any property. It is recommended that potential buyers know what minerals may be located under the property and find out who owns the mineral rights before a purchase is made.

**Noxious Weeds.** Kansas statutes identify specific noxious weeds and regulate their control and eradication. Landowners are required to control noxious weeds on their property. Control is defined as preventing the production of viable seed and the vegetative spread of the plant. If not controlled, the county has the authority to take control measures, charge the landowner for the cost of control, and take a lien on property for unpaid charges. The local extension agent or weed department can help identify noxious weeds and provide guidance about control. The weed department may provide sprayers and herbicides at reduced cost to help control infestations. Users are responsible for reading and following chemical label directions, protecting groundwater and surface water, and safely working with pesticides. Persons who handle and apply certain pesticides are required to be certi-

fied by the Kansas Department of Agriculture (KDA).

**Property Lines and Fences.** Fences do not necessarily line up with property boundaries. It is the landowner's responsibility to know where property lines are located, whether fenced or not. The most accurate way to confirm property lines is to hire a licensed surveyor, since an existing plat may not be accurate. In addition, the Kansas fence law states that construction and maintenance of partition fences should be in equal shares; it does not state how costs will be shared. Because disagreements can arise over type of fence and maintenance, it is the responsibility of adjoining landowners to work out fencing details.

**Zoning and Land Use.** Zoning is a common way for counties to regulate land-use activities. About half of Kansas' 105 counties are zoned, most in the eastern part of the state. To determine whether rural areas of a county are zoned, check with the county planning and zoning office. In zoned counties, most rural property is designated for agricultural use. Agricultural zoning provides areas for farm businesses that are free from the conflicts of residential neighbors. To build in a rural area, the site must be zoned residential. While zoning limits land-use activities, it also provides certain safeguards against undesirable use of nearby property. In counties with no zoning, there may be no restrictions on property use, regardless of its impact on the value of neighboring property. Keep in mind that surrounding properties may not indefinitely remain as they are. Before buying land in the country, check with the county planning office to find out how nearby property is zoned and if future developments are planned.

## Public Services

**Emergency Services.** In the city, emergency services are expected to be very prompt. Distance traveled and road conditions contribute to slower response times in rural areas. In most counties, an Emergency Medical Service (EMS) provides ambulance service for the entire county. The service may be staffed by volunteer emergency medical technicians. In fact, volunteers provide many emergency services in rural areas. When 911 is called, volunteers are paged and may have to drive to the fire or ambulance station before responding to the emergency call. This procedure increases response time. Easy-to-read addresses and proper posting enable emergency responders to easily find a site. Post an easily visible house number by the road. Keep clear, concise directions near the telephone in case of an emergency. Service to a secluded or hard-to-reach area will take even longer. A driveway that is narrow, has trees or other hazards, or has a bridge or culvert that won't support large equipment (such as a fire truck) limits the ability of emergency personnel to respond to a call. Because fire protection is limited, landowners should expect to pay more for property insurance. Rural fire departments must haul their own water. Easy access to a pond with a dry hydrant is especially helpful for rural fire protection.

**Household Hazardous Waste.** Household wastes such as motor oil, antifreeze, batteries, paint, solvents, lawn and garden chemicals, and household cleaners are considered hazardous and should not be discarded with regular refuse. Many counties have a household hazardous waste facility. Contact the county government for information.

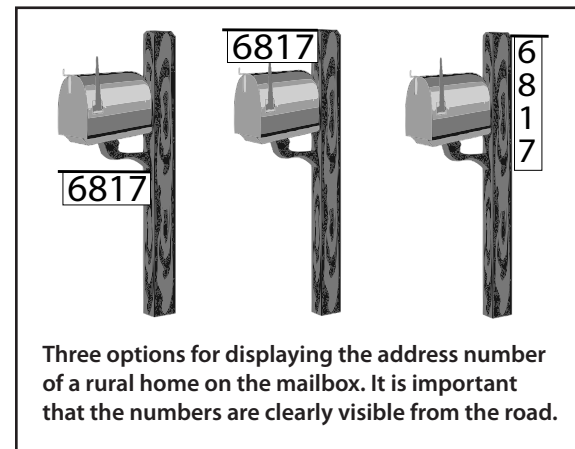
**Law Enforcement.** The county sheriff's department has jurisdiction in unincorporated areas of a county. In emergencies, police officers from nearby towns may assist. In the city, police

protection covers square blocks. The sheriff's jurisdiction covers the whole county, so response time may be longer.

The illicit production of methamphetamine (meth) is a serious problem in rural areas. Meth production sites, which can be located anywhere, pose health and safety risks. Rural residents

should familiarize themselves with the warning signs of meth production and report to the sheriff's office unusual activities, suspicious locations, crimes, burglaries, or thefts.

**Mail and Delivery Services.** The U.S. Postal Service delivers mail to rural areas. In most cases, establishing service to an existing or new home on a mail route is easy. Check with the post office to verify that an existing mailbox or a new box meets postal service regulations for size and height. For a new home that isn't on an established route, check with the post office first



to learn if service can be extended to that area. The local postmaster will specify where a new mailbox must be placed – typically on a public road near an existing route. The owner must retrieve the mail from the box.

Private shipping/parcel services will usually deliver to rural addresses, but not to post office boxes. Verify package delivery to a home in the country. Newspaper delivery is not always available or may be more expensive and less convenient than a similar service in the city. Check with the newspaper business office to see if rural delivery is available.

**Waste Reduction.** Recycling reduces the amount of trash that goes into the landfill. Recyclables include newspapers, aluminum cans, mixed paper, glass, cardboard, some plastics, and most scrap metal. Contact the nearest city for recycling services, dates, and times. Some counties have satellite locations where recyclables can be dropped off, and some refuse collectors offer recycling plans. Yard waste, such as grass clippings, brush, and organic wastes, can be composted at home; some counties have a composting site at the landfill or transfer station. Contact the local extension office for more information about personal composting.

**Trash Removal.** Check the yellow pages under trash hauling for companies that collect trash and ask them about rural collection. When trash service is not available, landowners will have to store and self-haul trash to a collection point, transfer station, or the landfill. Storing trash attracts rodents and insects, creates odors, and can be wind-blown.

Although trash burning may be legal in unincorporated areas of a county, it is not recom-

mended because of fire and environmental hazards from burning metals, plastics, and other man-made materials. Call the fire department for a burn permit and notify the fire department or the sheriff every time burning occurs. When trash is burned, understand that the owner is responsible if the fire spreads. During drought periods, burning may be banned, and the landowner will have to store trash or have an alternative plan.

### Utilities

Electricity, water, sewer, telephone, and other utilities may operate at levels somewhat lower than urban standards, and at times utilities will not function at all. Also be prepared to pay more for utilities in rural areas.

**Electricity.** Very few areas of Kansas are completely without electrical service. However, when electrical service is not near a site, the electric utility or cooperative may require a share of the infrastructure cost (lines and poles) to extend service there. Find out which supplier covers the area and consider all costs before making a decision to purchase the property. In addition to charges for energy consumed, rural homeowners may be charged for hooking up to the system. Electric lines may have to cross property owned by others, meaning easements must be obtained to allow access to the designated property. Make sure easements can be secured before purchasing property.



Downed power lines near Riley, Kan., after an ice storm.

Photo by Morgan Powell

Power outages occur more frequently and may last longer in rural areas. Loss of power will interrupt a well pump and all other electrical appliances. Be prepared to survive without electricity and well water for several days in severe heat or cold.

Be prepared for power outages by maintaining an emergency supply of batteries, food, fuel, and water. Additional supplies should include a crank-powered radio, candles and matches. When the electricity goes out, report it to the electric service provider. During extended outages, food in freezers and refrigerators may spoil. Access to an emergency generator for backup is a good idea.

Power outages or current spikes can damage computers and other home electronic equipment. Check with the local electrical supplier to determine the best type of surge protection.

**Home Heating.** Natural gas availability is

limited in rural areas. Most rural residences use propane (liquefied petroleum gas, LP-gas, or LPG) or electric heat. The cost of propane or electricity is normally higher per BTU than natural gas. Propane is typically stored in a pressurized bulk tank, which may be rented or purchased from the supplier. Fuel deliveries are made by truck, homeowners must maintain an adequate supply – especially when deliveries are delayed because of weekends, holidays, or weather. Appliances designed for use with natural gas must be converted to operate on propane, which can be costly. Wood is popular as a heat source when a ready supply is available. Because there are a variety of choices for whole-house heating with wood, it is wise to explore the options before construction.

**Sewer.** Central sewage systems are rarely available in rural areas. When a central system is not available, sewage must be handled with an approved onsite wastewater system. There are minimum state standards for onsite systems that stipulate the type and size of treatment system allowed. Most counties also have a sanitary code that regulates septic system construction and maintenance and may specify minimum lot size. Code information can be obtained from the sanitarian at the county health department or code enforcement office.

Septic system suitability depends on the soil type, geology, and topography of the site as well as on the local sanitary code. Sufficient area is required at the site to locate the septic system away from the residence, floodplains, wetlands, trees, and man-made structures.

Regular septic system maintenance assures a longer life and fewer problems, such as sewage

backing up into the house. Consider access for maintenance when choosing a site and planning the system. Maintenance frequency depends on the type of system and quantity of wastewater. Contact the county sanitarian or the local extension office for information on selection, operation, and maintenance of onsite wastewater systems. A source for information about septic systems is the K-State Research and Extension Web site, [www.oznet.ksu.edu/library](http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library); use the search term “septic system.”

**Telecommunications.** Rural telecommunication services are not as limited as they once were, but may be more expensive than comparable services in the city. Many rural phone companies provide Internet, land line telephone, cellular, and television services, although options vary widely by location. Some areas in Kansas may not have Internet access, but service is continually updated and upgraded. In some locations a satellite dish may be an option for television and/or Internet service. Cellular phone service varies widely in rural areas and by provider. Check the cellular carrier’s coverage maps carefully when relocating to the country. Where cellular service is unreliable, it is a good idea to keep a land line.

**Water.** Before purchasing a rural home or property, it is a good idea to determine if the site has a safe, reliable supply of drinkable water. When a public water supply is not available, typically household water is supplied by a well. Water quantity and quality can vary significantly by location and even season. Well drilling can be expensive and there is no guarantee of enough good water, since groundwater is not available everywhere. In Kansas, wells may be drilled only

by a licensed driller or the property owner. In some counties the code requires a well permit before drilling. Because pumps are typically electric, power outages will interrupt the water supply.

Minimum standards for wells include setback distances from: buildings, property lines, and any source of contamination including a wastewater system, fertilizer or pesticide storage area, feed lot, and any other potential pollution source. Setback distances vary by county code.

Water quality from a private well is the well owner’s responsibility. In Kansas, well water tends to be hard, so a water softener may be desirable. Other treatment equipment might be needed to ensure a safe drinking water supply.

In some areas of Kansas, public water is available from a rural water district (RWD). RWDs are controlled by member owners and managed by an elected board. When rural water is available, the RWD usually charges a membership fee, which covers installation of the meter, metering pit, and a portion of the district capital. The landowner pays for extending the line to the building site. Membership in the RWD stays with the property, and must be transferred from the seller to the new owners. The cost of RWD water can vary significantly, depending on condition of equipment, treatment, and length of pipeline per connection. Rural water fees tend to be higher than municipal water fees, and the water supply may be more limited. Check with the county government to determine if a rural property is in or near an existing RWD. When a rural property is near a community, hooking up to a municipal water supply may also be an option.



By law, abandoned wells must either be upgraded to current construction standards or must be properly plugged (sealed). These open holes are direct conduits for pollutants to enter and contaminate groundwater. The Web site [www.kswaterwell.org](http://www.kswaterwell.org), local extension office, and Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) have more information.

## Nature and the Environment

**Floodplains.** It is always the owner's responsibility to protect personal property from flood damage. Local government is not responsible for flooding on private property. While it may be aesthetically desirable to site a home near a stream, that stream will flow out of the channel and onto the floodplain during high water events. Local, state, and federal regulations may limit or prohibit construction in these locations. It is important to know if the property under consideration is located in a floodplain. The owner of a home in the floodplain may be required to carry coverage through the National Flood Insurance Program, and rates will be high. Even if a home is built above the floodplain, it may become inaccessible when water rises. Property that is not in a designated floodplain can also flood, especially if it is in a low-lying or flat area. The county planning office has flood maps. Remember that floods come in all sizes and that there can always be one larger than that shown on a map.

**House Siting.** When searching for a home site or evaluating an existing home, examine the lay of the land to determine where water naturally flows. Keep in mind that the direction of runoff from flat areas is difficult to predict. It is also a good idea to determine if there are watershed

dams upstream from a proposed home site, their size, and potential consequences of a dam break.

When a new home is built, runoff will increase and the new construction may alter water flow. Drainage from neighboring areas can also affect a property. A man-made change in the natural course of a stream on any property requires a permit from the Kansas Department of Agriculture, Division of Water Resources (DWR).

To avoid a wet basement or other problems, check for springs and seeps on the property, especially when the site includes sloping hillsides. A line of shrubs on a hillside may indicate an active or intermittent spring. Springs are often active after an extended wet period or heavy rain. Keep water out of a new or existing house and remove groundwater with footing drains and a sump pump. A power outage during a storm will inactivate the sump pump. Be aware that light pollution exists even in the most rural areas. Depending on separation distance, it may be mildly or extremely annoying. Light sources continue to increase and include cities, towers, industry, houses, and farms.

**Landscaping.** A country setting offers many options for natural landscaping. Look around the property for attractive native plant species that are growing well. Typically in Kansas,



A cedar tree goes up like a torch.

Photo by Paul Ohlenbusch

native grasses will be nearby regardless of the location. Native grasses and shrubs can be easily integrated into a landscape plan. They require less maintenance, water, and fertilizer than non-native species. Rural homeowners often limit water for landscaping. However, when a good private well is available, more water could be used. The local extension and United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS), or conservation district offices are good sources for information about planting and caring for native plants.

Kansas Forest Service (KFS) recommends a 105-foot radius fire break of watered, cool season grass – such as fescue – around homes and outbuildings. Avoid combustible materials such as dry grass, leaves, and dead wood near buildings. Choose landscaping that has no combustible material within three feet of buildings. For additional information contact the National

Fire Prevention Association or the Firewise Communities program ([www.firewise.org](http://www.firewise.org)). Because of the potential for wildfires, building near sources of combustible material such as in a wooded draw or next to prairie grass should be considered just as dangerous as building in a floodplain.

Avoid the temptation to have a lush, well-fertilized, manicured lawn particularly near creeks, ponds, and other surface water. Fertilizer runs off easily and its nutrients are principal pollutants in lakes and ponds throughout Kansas.

Maintaining and enhancing natural landscapes will also attract wildlife. Old hedge rows provide good wildlife habitat and can be maintained. Consider planting a windbreak or shelter belt of trees and shrubs or enhancing wooded areas. The KFS publication *Windbreaks for Kansas* is an excellent resource. The local extension office has resources on tree planting and care.

**Planned Fires and Wildfires.** Annually prescribed burning is used on an average of two million acres in Kansas, posing a risk for unintentional damage if the fire gets out of control. Homeowners can protect their structures by following the recommendations in the “Landscaping” section. Fires that are not planned or prescribed, pose additional risks. When wildfires are mentioned, most people think of forests and/or mountains. However, Kansas wildfires blacken an estimated 150,000 acres each year, often damage or destroy homes and other buildings, and cause deaths. Seven of the 25 most expensive fires in U.S. history were wildfires. Much of the loss in rural areas may be because sites are further from fire-protection services. Much property damage and loss of

life can be prevented by a better understanding of dangers and by more careful planning and action on the part of homeowners.

**Soils.** Soils in Kansas are highly variable. Limiting conditions – such as shallow rock, slow permeability, high erosion potential, or shallow water table – are common. Some soil types may require special building considerations. Soils that have high shrink-swell properties can cause severe damage to concrete foundations, walls, and drives. When building on a site with shrink-swell soils, an engineered foundation should be used to minimize the risk of future damage. Work with an experienced and qualified consultant to determine foundation and road design considerations.

NRCS soil survey information is available online at <http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov>. Soil sampling from the site should be done when a garden, lawn, or crops will be grown on the property. The resulting report will provide information on the nutrient status of the soils on the site. Soil samples can be delivered to the local extension office for analysis by the K-State Soil Testing Laboratory.

**Water Quality.** It is the landowner’s responsibility to protect the quality of water that flows or drains off of the property. Polluted runoff water leaving the landscape is considered non-point source pollution. Runoff pollution contributes the majority of current impairment to Kansas streams and lakes. Practices that protect water quality include:

- controlling erosion with structures, such as terraces.
- limiting use of pesticides and fertilizers and

always following label directions.

- maintaining vegetated buffer strips adjacent to surface water.
- managing grazing animals at rates that protect vegetation.
- managing fresh or composted manure by land application.
- restricting vehicle and animal access to surface water.
- maintaining onsite wastewater systems to standards.
- disposing of all trash and solid wastes appropriately.
- plugging abandoned wells.

**Weather.** Kansas weather is unpredictable at best. Very few rural areas are covered by advance warning systems for severe storms and/or tornadoes. However, (NOAA) weather radio can be accessed in most areas. When buying or building, make sure there is access to a storm shelter, safe room, or basement.

Wind is more noticeable in a rural settings because there are fewer buildings and trees. Thunderstorm winds can be particularly damaging. It is common for the wind to topple lawn furniture, barbecue grills, and children’s toys unless they are firmly anchored. The wind also raises dust that blows in from roads and fields.

In the winter, wind will whip snow into drifts. Property owners are responsible for clearing snow from their own property. The township or county will eventually clear public roads but not driveways or private lanes. Weather-related electrical outages are more common and often last longer than in urban areas. To avoid outages,

keep trees trimmed shorter than power lines.

**Wildlife and Hunting.** Nature provides wonderful neighbors. Wildlife, while enjoyable to watch, can be dangerous. Do not attempt to approach or feed wild animals. Even seemingly harmless animals such as deer can become dangerous when they cross the road unexpectedly. Expect deer, rabbits, and other wildlife to eat landscape and garden plants. The local extension office and Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks (KDWP) can offer tips for naturally deterring wildlife from the yard and garden.

Wildlife can pose health dangers for people and pets. Some, such as skunks and raccoons, are known to carry rabies. Wild animals acting unusually – showing no fear of humans, for example – should not be approached. A bite by a dog or wild animal requires immediate medical attention and should be reported to the county health department. For general information about wildlife, contact the KDWP or the local extension office.

Kansas is known for good hunting. Expect to hear gunshots and to see hunters and more traffic during hunting seasons. People may hunt on private property with permission from the owner. Contact the local KDWP conservation officer if trespassing occurs or illegal hunting activities are suspected. It is common in Kansas for landowners who do not want hunters on their property to post “no hunting” signs and to paint purple on gates and fence posts.

## Good Neighbors

It is typical in rural Kansas for neighborliness to be practiced and expected. At the same time, the expectation is that privacy and private property

rights will also be respected.

Once a property is purchased, it is a good idea to begin to get to know the neighbors – even before moving.

Established rural areas have a sense of community. Do not expect to be immediately welcomed. Some established neighbors may feel threatened or frightened by people who move from the city. To ease into the neighborhood, try to meet the neighbors on their terms by becoming involved in community activities. New residents who make an effort to learn the history of the community and become part of its social fabric are more likely to be welcomed and accepted. For connection to a new community, subscribe to the local newspaper, join a local church or civic organization, and attend community events.

**Pets.** Everyone has a right to own a pet if they choose. Pet ownership comes with the responsibility for pet care. Pets require food, shelter, pens, supervision, training, exercise, and vaccinations. Dogs can become a nuisance for livestock producers when they are allowed to roam. Roaming dogs sometimes join with other dogs and will kill small animals such as chickens or sheep, agitate livestock, and can even cause a cow to abort its calf. It is legal and considered acceptable to stop nuisance dogs by shooting, so do not assume pets can safely run free.

Some pet owners decide they don't want a pet



Horses graze in an Ellsworth County pasture.

Photo by Carol Blocksome

anymore and dump it in a rural area to fend for itself. This usually results in the pet being run over by a car, shot, killed by a wild animal, or starving to death. Rural homeowners can expect stray animals to show up occasionally. Many counties have an animal control officer who responds to calls about livestock, strays, exotic animals, and animal cruelty. After hours calls should go to the county sheriff's office.

**Large Animals.** Some counties have minimum acreage requirements for stocking large animals. Check with the county planning and zoning office to find out if there is a minimum acreage. Grazing animals require a considerable amount of grass for adequate nutrition. For example, in most parts of Kansas it takes a minimum of 10 acres of pasture to adequately feed one horse for a year. Livestock ownership also requires a manure management plan for applying livestock waste to the land at an

agronomically correct rate.

Animals need a freely available, abundant source of clean, fresh water. Avoid water quality issues by limiting access to streams and by maintaining a grass buffer area between confined animal pens and surface water. Contact the local extension office for information about animal ownership and management.

## Agriculture

Agriculture is very important to the Kansas economy. By choosing to live in the country, rural homeowners choose to live among farms and farmers in an agricultural setting. Kansas' "right to farm" law protects established agricultural operations against nuisance complaints from non-farming neighbors. The premise behind the "right to farm" law is to protect businesses that produce food and fiber.

**Agricultural chemicals.** Fertilizers, pesticides (herbicides, insecticides, rodenticides, etc.), and other potentially hazardous chemicals are used legally in most farming and ranching operations. Application is made by hand, ground rig, or airplane. Exposure may cause sensitivity or allergic reaction in some people.

**Hours of Operation.** Farming is a business without regular work hours. Depending on the season and the tasks to be completed, a typical work day may begin before sunup and may not end until well after sundown. During the busiest times of the year, weekends are as busy as weekdays.

Routine farming activities may produce noise, odor, heavy equipment traffic, dust, pollen, and bright lights on equipment being operated at night. There will be trucks, tractors, wagons, and

slow-moving farm equipment on local roads. In some areas, it is common practice to burn crop residue (especially wheat straw) or rangeland – often in the evening or at night when it is less windy. The smoke can obstruct visibility. Farming activities may interfere with the lifestyle of new country residents and could cause health issues for people who suffer from allergies or asthma.

**Livestock.** Cattle, sheep, horses, pigs, chickens, and other farm animals create dust, manure, odors, and some noise. Manure is a valuable source of organic fertilizer and its use reduces dependency on chemical fertilizer. Farmers use well-researched, best management practices and follow environmental regulations when applying manure to fields. Still, the scent of manure might be objectionable. Check carefully before buying a rural home-site to be sure it is located at a reasonable distance from livestock operations. Know prevailing winds and upwind livestock concentrations before buying. Livestock occasionally get out of their pens. Most livestock owners appreciate a call when their animals get out.

## Buying or Building a Home

Buying an existing country house can be a challenge. It is up to the buyer to identify problems requiring repair or safety improvements before the property is purchased. Disclosure statements are an accepted way to protect a buyer; however,



A central Kansas rural home.

Photo by Morgan Powell

Kansas has no statutory requirement for a seller to disclose. To avoid having a home sell while investigations are pending, make an offer and sign a contract contingent on home inspection and meeting certain standards.

Buyers should expect a home to meet the codes that existed when it was built. A house built decades ago may not meet current codes unless the home has been updated. An inspection is one way to evaluate what you are buying. Because Kansas home inspectors are not licensed, there are no standard qualifications. Evaluate an inspector's references with realtors, county officials, and lenders. Also consider the scope of the inspection.

Real estate transaction customs develop over time to protect sellers and buyers. Customs differ by location, so seek advice from a trusted realtor about local customs.

Tips for buyers:

- Evaluate visible parts of the house such as insulation, paint and other finishes, caulking, windows, doors, and weather stripping.
- Negotiate and sign a buyers' agent agreement with a trusted, licensed realtor who will represent the buyer's interests.
- Require full disclosure from the seller.
- Hire a trained and experienced home or code inspector to evaluate building components: foundation, structure, drainage, heating and air conditioning, roof, electrical, plumbing, and any item in question.
- The local health department may provide inspection of private wells and septic systems.

Building a house in the country can be equally challenging. Thoroughly check the references of builders with several sources. Examples include: the Kansas Attorney General's consumer protection division and the Better Business Bureau, the builder's customers, construction material suppliers, realtors, city/county officials, and lenders. Hire a builder who knows and follows codes. If possible visit a builder's site before hiring and discuss building material options, insulation, air infiltration and exchange, and workmanship. Negotiate material specifications and construction procedures and include these in the written contract. Once construction has begun, visit the site regularly, preferably daily. Ask the contractor to explain any actions you do not understand.

Prior to construction determine if code inspections will be done by local government. Some counties do not have code inspection, so ask how to ensure that minimum standards are met.

Consider hiring an experienced, trained code or home inspector to provide construction oversight. When using an architect, construction oversight may be available for a fee.

People who are uncertain if country living is right for them may consider renting before purchase. Renters should familiarize themselves with their rights and responsibilities. Services available to renters will be similar to those for owners with the added responsibility of interacting with a landlord.

### Acronyms Used:

DWR: Division of Water Resources of KDA

EMS: Emergency Medical Service

FSA: Farm Service Agency of USDA

KDHE: Kansas Department of Health and Environment

KDA: Kansas Department of Agriculture

KDWP: Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks

KSDE: Kansas State Department of Education

LPG: liquefied petroleum gas

NRCS: Natural Resources Conservation Service of USDA

RWD: Rural Water District

USDA: United States Department of Agriculture

### References and Resources:

American Ground Water Trust, 16 Centre Street, Concord, NH 03301, 603-228-5444, [www.agwt.org](http://www.agwt.org)

Country Living Association, 16020 Swingley Ridge Road Suite 300, Chesterfield, MO, 63017, 636-449-5088, [www.countrylivingassociation.org](http://www.countrylivingassociation.org)

*Encyclopedia of Country Living*, 9th edition, 2003, Sasquatch Books. ISBN 157061377X [www.carlaemery.com/country-living-book.htm](http://www.carlaemery.com/country-living-book.htm)

*Farm Safety 4 Just Kids*, educational material for keeping children safe on the farm and in rural areas, [www.fs4jk.org](http://www.fs4jk.org)

*Finding & Buying Your Place in the Country*, Les Scher and Carol Scher, 5th edition, 2000, Dearborn Trade Publishing, ISBN 0-7931-4109-5

Iowa State University Acreage Living newsletter (1998-2000), [www.extension.iastate.edu/acreage/contents.html](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/acreage/contents.html)

K-State Research and Extension publications, local extension office and in a searchable online library, [www.oznet.ksu.edu/library](http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library)

*Kansas Tenants Handbook, 2007*, Housing and Credit Counseling Inc., 1195 Buchanan, Suite 101, Topeka, KS 66604-1183, [www.hcci-ks.org/tenanthelp.htm](http://www.hcci-ks.org/tenanthelp.htm)

The following publications are available from Midwest Plan Service, 122 Davidson Hall, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011-3080, 800-562-3618, [www.mwps.org](http://www.mwps.org).

*Living on Acreages: What You Need To Know*, 1st edition, 2006, MWPS-50, Editors Natalie Carroll and Don Jones,

*Private Water Systems Handbook*, MWPS-14, 4th edition (5th edition expected 2008)

*The House Handbook, Guidelines for Building or Remodeling Your Home*, MWPS-16, 2006

*The Pond Guidebook*, NRAES-178, Jim Ochterski, Brian Swistock, Clifford Kraft, Rebecca Schneider

## Emergency Address

(Include a short clear description and the legal description)

## Helpful Contacts

Agency Name	Individual Name	Phone
<b>Local and County Government</b>		
Appraiser		
Building Permits/Codes		
County Attorney		
County Clerk		
County Commissioners		
County Parks and Recreation		
Driver's License		
Economic Development/Planning and Development		
Election		
Emergency Management/Homeland Security		
Health Department		
Noxious Weed Department		
Planning and Zoning		
Public Works		
Register of Deeds		
Solid Waste		
Treasurer		
Vehicle Registration (Co. Treasurer)		
Voting (County Clerk)		
Water, Wastewater Permits (Health/Environment Dept.)		
<b>Emergency/Law Enforcement</b>		
Ambulance		
Animal Control		
Doctor		
Emergency <b>911</b>		
Fire District or Department		
Hospital Emergency Room		

<b>Helpful Contacts</b>		
<b>Agency Name</b>	<b>Individual Name</b>	<b>Phone</b>
Poison Control Center <b>1-800-332-6633</b>		
Sheriff/Police		
Wildlife and Parks Conservation Office		
<b>Information/Educational Resources</b>		
K-State Research & Extension Office <i>www.oznet.ksu.edu</i>	Ag Agent FACS Agent Horticulture Agent 4-H/Youth Agent	
Public Library		
Schools		
<b>Service Providers</b>		
Electricity Company		
Heating Fuel or Gas Service		
Internet service		
Kansas One Call <b>1-800-DIG-SAFE; 1-800-344-7233</b> <i>kansasonecall.com</i>	Statewide contact for locating/marketing underground utilities. Call two business days before digging.	
Post Office		
Realtor		
Rural Water District		
Septic System Service		
Telephone – land line		
Telephone – cellular		
Television – cable, direct, satellite		
Veterinarian		
<b>United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)</b>		
Farm Service Agency <i>www.fsa.usda.gov</i>		
Rural Development <i>www.rurdev.usda.gov</i>		
Natural Resources Conservation Service <i>www.nrcs.usda.gov</i>		

<b>Helpful Contacts</b>		
<b>Agency Name</b>	<b>Individual Name</b>	<b>Phone</b>
<b>Other Agencies</b>		
Environmental Protection Agency <i>www.epa.gov</i>		
Firewise Communities <i>www.firewise.org</i> Kansas contact, Jason Hartman (785) 532-3316		
Kansas Corporation Commission <i>www.kcc.state.ks.us</i>		
Kansas Department of Agriculture and Division of Water Resources <i>www.ksda.gov</i>		
Kansas Department of Health and Environment <i>www.kdheks.gov</i>		
Kansas Department of Transportation <i>www.ksdot.org</i> 511 or <i>511.ksdot.org</i> for road conditions		
Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks <i>www.kdwp.state.ks.us</i>		
Kansas Forest Service <i>www.kansasforests.org</i> State office (785) 532-3300		
Kansas Geological Survey <i>www.kgs.ku.edu</i>		
National Weather Service, Current Watches, Warnings and Advisories for Kansas <i>www.weather.gov/alerts/ks.html</i>		

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