The siting of large livestock facilities continues to be a contentious issue across the Midwest, with some states such as Wisconsin preempting local authority and setting statewide standards. But Nebraska has kept local control over the rules determining decisions on new or expanded operations. Thirteen years ago, with an eye toward supporting the industry but not stripping away local zoning authority, the Nebraska Legislature gave counties across the state the chance to be designated as “livestock friendly.”

Today, nearly half of Nebraska’s counties (41 of 92) have sought and received the designation. According to a University of Nebraska-Lincoln study, cattle operations in the state’s livestock-friendly counties expanded by 12 percent from 2002 to 2012. Over that same period, the growth rate for other counties was 8 percent. And although the number of hog farms dropped in most Nebraska counties between 2002 and 2012, the decline was much less severe in livestock-friendly counties: 16 percent vs. 62 percent.

To receive the designation, a county board in Nebraska passes a resolution and then completes an application with the state Department of Agriculture. State officials then use a range of criteria to determine whether the designation is warranted. For example:

- Does the local government agree not to exceed state standards on livestock siting, unless stronger environmental standards are “supported by a scientifically justified environmental risk analysis”?
- Is it using “objective, science-based standards” to govern land use and issue permits?
- Does it have plans in place to reduce nonfarm development in areas traditionally used for agriculture?

Along with helping counties market themselves as “livestock friendly,” the program provides an outside evaluation of how local zoning regulations and other requirements affect future development of a key industry across the state.

And with passage of LB 106 in 2015, Nebraska legislators gave local producers and county leaders another tool — an assessment matrix developed by the state Department of Agriculture to evaluate siting applications. The criteria for livestock-permit applications include how well the proposals protect public health and control odors, as well as whether they are cost-effective and add economic value to the community.

“The matrix is a scorecard that a farmer can use to evaluate [his or her] livestock expansion proposal and be fairly certain it will be approved by local zoning boards,” explains Al Juhnke, a former Minnesota state legislator who now serves as executive director of the Nebraska Pork Producers Association.

The state Department of Agriculture released the matrix tool in September. Use of the matrix is voluntary, but the state is hoping that counties adopt the criteria, thus providing more certainty and a greater use of quantitative assessments to govern siting decisions.

“The goal of the Livestock Friendly County program and the livestock-siting matrix is to provide clear science-based guidelines for farmers,” Nebraska Sen. John Kuehn says. “Reducing uncertainty of the process promotes goodwill among livestock producers and local communities, as well as facilities investment in rural Nebraska.”