

For shooting enthusiasts happiness can be defined by the sight of tightly grouped holes in paper, the echoing sound of a bullet striking a metal target, or the satisfying view of a clay target disappearing in a cloud of dust. According to the National Shooting Sports Foundation, more than 20 million people each year participate in target shooting regularly. In Minnesota, studies estimate that between 40% and 45% of households own at least one firearm. Target shooting, whether for recreation or in preparation for hunting seasons, is a big deal in Central Minnesota. The ability to participate in target shooting on your own piece of property is seen as a premium feature by many residents. However, target shooting on private property does sometimes become a source of conflict between neighbors that results in calls to our office. Safety and adherence to the law are the primary considerations of our office when reviewing firearms calls.

The primary concern for anyone using firearms, whether on their own property, on the property of someone else, or at a commercial shooting range, must be safety. Bullets from a rifle or handgun and pellets from a shotgun that travel beyond the intended target can create hazards if not properly managed. A proper backstop for rifle and handgun bullets is vital for ensuring safety. The most common and effective backstops are berms made of soil. The primary considerations for any backstop are whether it will stop and contain a bullet and whether it is of sufficient size to account for both well-aimed and errant rounds fired at the backstop. While we all would like to think of ourselves as proficient shooters, it is much better to err on the side of too large a backstop. A misaligned sight, and unexpected flinch, or recoil could all easily cause a bullet to travel off target by a foot or more depending upon the distance to the target. There is no such thing as being too safe when using firearms.

One of the first lessons taught in firearms safety is to know your target and what is beyond your target. The downrange distance and direction to any other buildings or areas commonly occupied by people is just as important as a good backstop. Rifle and handgun bullets can travel for a mile or better through unobstructed space. All firearms users must consider what lies beyond their intended target and ensure it is safe to fire in their chosen direction. Over the years our office has taken dozens of calls of people who suffered either personal injury or property damage from bullets that missed their intended target and traveled downrange to places a bullet was never meant to go. Even though most of these situations involve rifles or handguns, shotguns must also be used with care. Because shotguns are typically fired in the air at moving targets, shotgun users must be conscious of distance and direction to any buildings or people. Shotgun pellets, especially large diameter ones, can cause damage and harm hundreds of yards downrange. Even if the pellets can no longer cause damage, raining pellets on your neighbor's house is a sure way to get taken off the invite list for the next neighborhood BBQ.

After considering the safety aspects of a target shooting area, we must consider the laws that regulate the discharge of firearms. State law establishes minimum distances from homes and livestock a person must observe when shooting. While on another person's private land or a road right-of-way, shooters must be at least 500 feet from any building occupied by people or livestock or have written permission from the owner to shoot within the 500-foot safety buffer. This same restriction applies to a livestock corral. This 500-foot safety buffer does not apply to a person shooting on their own land, to a person hunting on public property, or to a person shooting while on the water. In all these exceptions, safety requirements must still be observed. Failing to abide by safety standards could result in criminal charges. Recklessly handling a firearm in a way that endangers the safety of another is a misdemeanor crime. Also, people are generally responsible for any damage caused by their use of a firearm.

When done safely and responsibly, target shooting and hunting are great ways to get outdoors and enjoy some time in nature. Our encouragement is to always keep safety and state laws in the forefront of your mind when enjoying some gun powder therapy. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.