

Pa. Ag Dept. Announces Research Project Grants

Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Jim McHale announced that contracts for 15 new agricultural research projects totaling \$280,000 have been signed this fiscal year, with several of them aimed at improving marketing services for farmers.

McHale said a total of 24 research projects are underway for fiscal year 1972-73, nine of which are being continued from the previous year. The projects, funded in part by an annual appropriation of about \$400,000 from harness racing proceeds, are conducted primarily with

facilities at Pennsylvania State University, the University of Pennsylvania and the state Department of Agriculture.

"We have some innovative projects this year which I hope will lead to farmers getting a larger share of the retail food dollar," said McHale. "We want to streamline marketing procedures so that farm produce gets to consumer outlets more directly and efficiently. Marketing has been one phase of agriculture that has been ignored too long," McHale added.

The secretary singled out four projects that should be of direct

benefit to farm income: "Researching Opportunities for Improving and Expanding Direct Marketing by Agricultural Producers and Processors," contracted with Penn State University; "Regional Agricultural Commodity Trade and Service Center Feasibility Study," with Department of Agriculture; "Feasibility Study for Milk Surplus Plants in western Pennsylvania," Penn State University; and "A Marketing Study, Certification Program, and Development of Production Procedures for Organic Farmers in Pennsylvania," Penn State University.

McHale said he has stressed that project proposals show how they relate to improving farm income. "I am pleased that Penn State and other institutions with fine research facilities have cooperated so well in revamping their research priorities," said McHale.

"Farm parity now stands at about 71 percent, the lowest since depression days, which indicates that production costs have been outstripping gains in gross receipts," McHale explained. "If marketing efficiency had kept pace with production efficiency,

farm income could have increased dramatically during the past 20 years."

McHale added that the emphasis on marketing in no way conflicts with the department's traditional concern with farm production. Two other new projects, for example, are the "Control of Corn Stalk Rot" and "Control of Potato Verticillium Wilt," both contracted with Penn State University.

"Eliminating corn stalk rot and potato wilt clearly will increase production of these crops," said McHale. "We do recognize that crops lost to disease obviously hurt a farmer's income and we certainly want research directed at these kinds of problems."

McHale said he was especially pleased with the marketing projects because they should result in better products for consumers as well as increased income for Pennsylvania farmers.

One problem that has plagued Pennsylvania farmers is the concentration of retail food distribution in fewer and larger firms. McHale contends these firms increasingly turn to large growers outside the state to purchase perishable produce.

"As a result of drastic change

in the food retailing market structure during the past 40 years," said McHale, "marketing opportunities for Pennsylvania agricultural products other than fluid milk, poultry, eggs and apples have been sharply curtailed."

McHale also noted that the marketing margin for fresh foods moving through conventional channels ranges between 30 and 70 percent of the retail price. "There are indications," said McHale, "that the marketing margin can be substantially narrowed by direct selling operations giving the farmer a greater share of the food dollar. Farmers are only getting 39 cents of the consumer dollar now, an increase of only one cent in ten years," McHale added.

McHale said the direct marketing project will study the concept of a statewide network of publicly owned outlets that would be leased and operated by local marketing corporations. These corporations would be directed by a board made up of local agricultural producers, processors and consumers.

The Regional Agricultural Commodity Trade and Service Center project also concerns direct market outlets but will consider the development of balanced rural communities — Agri-Centers. Studies will be made on fostering the growth of agricultural related facilities such as processing and packaging firms near prime agricultural land which together with farming can be the economic base of planned rural communities.

McHale said the project to study the feasibility of building a plant to process and bottle milk in western Pennsylvania stemmed from meetings with dairymen earlier this year.

Such a plant, said McHale, should encourage the regulation of milk supply in the western part of the state which for years has suffered spring surpluses and fall shortages.

The research project to protect organic food producers, said McHale, is another example of improving the link between farmers and consumers.

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