

Growing Need For Farm Fuel

Unless they're pumping oil, farmers can't make fuel any more than they can make it rain.

Big diesel tractors do most of the land fitting and planting in this country. If the fuel's not there when it's needed, crop yields will be sedive. In the central Corn Belt, corn yields per acre drop a bushel a day during May 1-15 for each day's delay in getting the crop in, and 2 bushels a day from then to the end of May.

It amounts to a hefty

financial loss for the man who farms 1,000 acres, not to mention inflated costs of corn on the local market due to the supply shrinkage.

How to lose \$157,000

Suppose this farmer's corn should have gone in May 1 but that a fuel shortage kept his tractors out of the field till June 1. Total yield reduction pencils out to 45 bushels an acre, or 45,000 bushels for the entire farm. At a market price of \$3.50 a bushel, the fuel crunch cost him over \$157,000.

Who cares?

Consumers should. In the end the farmer's loss will be handed to them in larger food bills.

The effect of fuel shortages on agriculture worries the lawmakers on Capitol Hill, too. So the Congress asked the USDA's Economic Research Service to assess the future needs for fuel by the food and fiber sector through 1980.

ERS's report in hand, Senator George McGovern—Chairman of the Subcommittee on Agricultural Credit and Rural Electrification—had this to say about agriculture's fuel priority:

"The timely supply of fossil fuels to the food and fiber sector is imperative for orderly processing and marketing of farm production inputs and food products at least-cost prices.

"Curtailed of natural gas and disruption of petroleum fuel supplies will require substantial capital expenditures . . . shortages of these fuels will reduce supplies of inputs and thus food and fiber."

The ERS study concluded that by 1980 the energy needs

of selected food and fiber industries will rise to nearly 5,200 trillion Btu (British thermal units), an increase of over 11 percent from 1970. (It takes 1 Btu to raise the temperature of 1 pound of water by 1 degree F.)

Fuel needs understated

ERS emphasized this projection applies only to five subsectors of the food and fiber industry—farm production, farm family living, food processing, marketing and distribution, and manufacture of certain inputs. Total energy needs of the whole food and fiber sector will total much more than 5,200 trillion Btu by 1980.

The industries selected for the ERS analysis used 4,667 trillion Btu of fossil fuel energy in 1970. Other studies have indicated our total food system, including home food storage and preparation, used up to 8,618 trillion Btu that year.

In the ERS breakdown, only the category of farm family living shows a decline in energy use in 1980. Top gainers in energy will be food processing, and marketing and distribution.

Fueling farm homes

Energy used for farm family living is slated to fall 10 percent as the number of farm families drops 21 percent to 2.33 million in 1980. Both natural gas and LP gas use, however, will increase as farm homes shift to these fuels for space heating.

Energy demands for food processing will balloon as much as 30 percent by 1980 due to the trend towards convenience foods, which have a hearty appetite for energy. Sharpest increase will be for frozen specialties—TV dinners, pizzas, and other snack foods. Their energy requirements will double by 1980, and will equal those of farm production and family living combined. Natural gas will remain the No. 1 energy source for food processing.

Marketing and distribution

Marketing and distribution will demand 19 percent more energy in 1980 compared with 1970. About nine-tenths will come from transportation—diesel fuel for trucks, trains, and barges—to get food from the farm to market.

Energy consumption for input manufacturing is projected to go up 15 percent between 1970 and 1980. The fertilizer industry will continue as the heaviest user, accounting for nearly 60 percent, and natural gas will be the principal energy source.

Farm production's energy needs are expected to show the smallest advance among all subsectors of the food and fiber industry, except for farm family living. Requirements for farm production will rise only 4.2 percent. But, farm production will remain the second biggest energy user after food processing—about

21 percent of the total for the industries studied. And without the energy to feed the production subsector, you can forget about the rest.

Acres for food

ERS has calculated that farmers will supply increased food needs from fewer acres in 1980, with acreage expected to decrease from 371 million in 1973 to 354-365 million in 1985. Yields will improve as farmers continue to adopt new technology.

The shift from gas to diesel tractors and combines will not let up, and diesel fuel will

account for over 40 percent of all farm production in 1980, up from 28 percent in 1973. LP gas use will climb slightly as farmers expand crop drying.

The predicted drain on natural gas supplies is a paramount concern to the culture. Natural gas is the feedstock for production of nitrogen fertilizer.

Ammonia and energy

Total energy requirements for anhydrous ammonia production are projected to increase from 458 trillion Btu in 1972-73 to 532 trillion by

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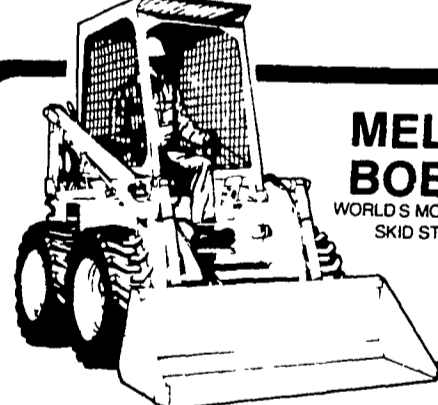
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