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Cooperatives need strengthening

By DIETER KRIEG
MOUNT JOY — What's wrong with farmer cooperatives? Not a whole lot, as far as Owen K. Hallberg is concerned. In fact, he emphatically states cooperatives have a "proud and illustrious history." Farmers have been able to lift themselves up by their bootstraps because of cooperatives, he said.

But it's not all roses. There are a few thorns, the president of the American Institute of Cooperation pointed out. A man who has worked for a number of prestigious companies and cooperatives, and is known nationally for his authoritative views, Hallberg was guest speaker at the 12th annual meeting of Atlantic Breeders Cooperative. The event was held here on Wednesday.

Cooperatives need to improve their public image, stop bickering among themselves, educate both insiders and outsiders, and in general pull together to meet the threatening challenges from society. "If we slow down our thrust in cooperatives, then the 'sink factor' comes in," the executive warned.

Hallberg sees farmer cooperatives as a legitimate business system which has definite advantages over other forms of enterprises. He advises that farmers become aware of these "unique characteristics" and capitalize on them. A primary advantage cooperatives have is that they deal with and involve people.

In presenting his views, he said farmers should recognize that: 1. cooperatives serve an economic need; 2. an interested and concerned membership is vital; 3. capable management is needed; 4. they should be attuned to the times and prepared for changes; 5. quality, price and service aren't to be overlooked; 6. financial information should flow two ways; and 7. inter-cooperation among farmers and their cooperatives should be evident on a local, state and national level.

Some misunderstandings have caused the entire cooperative concept to take a beating lately, Hallberg exclaimed. He noted that

attacks on them and the Capper-Volstead Act, which gave life to cooperative farmer organizations, are coming from top officials in the Justice Department, congressmen, the White House staff, and special interest groups.

Here's where the sink or swim factor Hallberg referred to earlier comes in. He is convinced cooperatives are for the good of agriculture and is encouraging all those connected with them to do their part in improving cooperatives' image and performance.

Steps he outlined for improvement include: 1. communication with insiders - members, directors, employees, and managers; 2. communication with outsiders - including housewives, clergy, congressmen, community leaders, extension personnel, and agribusinessmen; 3. public relations work with the media and expanding educational work. On the latter, Hallberg commented: "Cooperatives have been taken for granted; they're not completely or even partially understood. Education is a never-ending concern."

One of the points Hallberg repeatedly stressed was cooperation between various cooperatives. He asks: "Why is there so much bickering between them when they should work

together?" and is hopeful that this is one area where the cooperative movement will see improvement.

"Cooperatives are not getting too big," Hallberg asserted. He challenges opponents of that statement to question the bigness of large corporations and adds that farmer cooperatives are only a drop in the bucket in comparison. "Furthermore," he added, "competition is going to get worse and those companies won't stop growing."

The final answers will have to come from farmers themselves, he said. "To turn your back on politics you must be prepared to live with the laws of your adversaries," he said in his closing remarks. "The reason that history repeats itself is that no one listened the first time around."

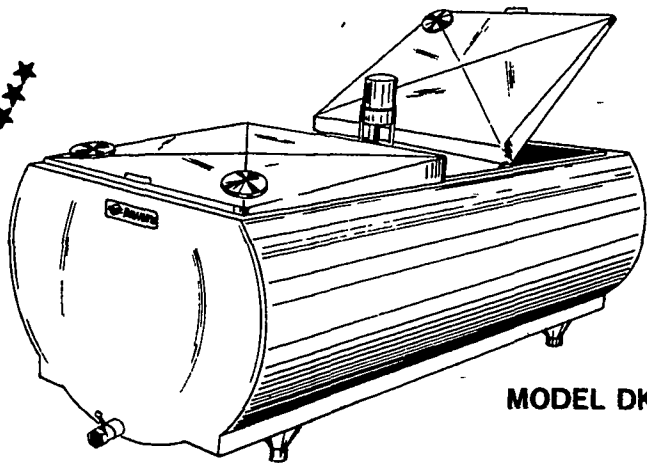
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