

TRY A CLASSIFIED

Question of bigger or better faces all farmers

By JERRY WEBB

Recent census data suggests that farms are getting larger - a statistic that surprises no one. But recently some farms have been getting much larger, leaving neighboring farmers to wonder what will happen to them.

Should a farmer get bigger just because it's a census trend? Can he find happiness with a few more acres?

All of the trends, surveys and opinions polls suggest that farmers place additional land at the very top of their want list. For one reason or another they feel they should add more acres. But is that a sure way to more income and a better life or is it merely an ego trip?

There is plenty of research data to suggest that farming more acres isn't the key to economic success. Maybe it's a combination of management ability and financial backing that keeps some big farmers from doing as well as their smaller neighbors. Which lead to the important question - should a farmer get bigger or get better?

Ask most farmers how big their operation is and they'll immediately respond in acres. We've grown to expect acres farmed to be a good measure of farm size. And certainly it is in a dimensional sense, but what a far cry from the real measure of a farm operation's true size.

It will take some serious probing to get at the true size of a farm business with most farmers dragging their feet all the way. Either they don't know or are reluctant to tell things like gross income, yield per acre, and production efficiency. They'd rather wow you with the fact that they till more than a thousand acres. If that doesn't dazzle you sufficiently and you keep asking snooty questions, most farmers will give you some ball park average yield figures - and maybe even some broadly applied selling prices.

But that's where it stops - they've told you enough. With a little math you've arrived at a gross income figure usually sufficient to boggle the mind and depending on your knowledge of farming, a new respect for the farmer's status as a taxpaying citizen.

In truth, you have only part of an equation that all farmers must solve for themselves before they can start to measure the benefits of more acres.

Farming a thousand acres poorly, with high production costs and low yields, can be far less profitable than managing a fourth of that really well. And that's where so many farmers are hooked by bigness. They see their neighbors getting bigger and they notice their own small earnings. And they figure that a small profit per acre multiplied by enough acres puts them where they want to be.

So they rent expensive land and buy much larger, terribly expensive and seldom used equipment to farm their great land holding. Much later they learn that production costs per acre increased, risks increased, sleepless nights increased and spendable income improved little or none.

Once committed it's hard to back down. Those big machines have to be loved and cared for and used if they are to be worth having. A \$30 thousand tractor or \$50 thousand combine has an annual cost of ownership that is staggering.

So once trapped into moving up most farmers stay and if their health and financial backing hold out they get better. Yields improve, production costs go down, the rains fall and they harvest a big crop at a time when prices are good. That's when it all becomes worthwhile.

But maybe it's important to get better first. We should stop measuring a farmer by the acres he tills and look instead at his productivity and efficiency.

There are many ways for a crops farmer to get better, more fertilizer, irrigation equipment, improved grain handling facilities, to name a few. But above all he had to improve himself - become a better farmer. How does he get that job done? The answer is through learning. It may not be as easy and as quick as buying a new tractor and renting more acres, but it can be just as satisfying.

A farmer who takes advantage of every learning situation to improve his abilities as a farmer learns to recognize his strengths and weaknesses and he learns to get help where it's needed.

There are plenty of experts available to farmers - many of them cost free - people who can help them learn and can advise on difficult decisions. Others can provide services that a farmer has neither time nor skill to do for himself.

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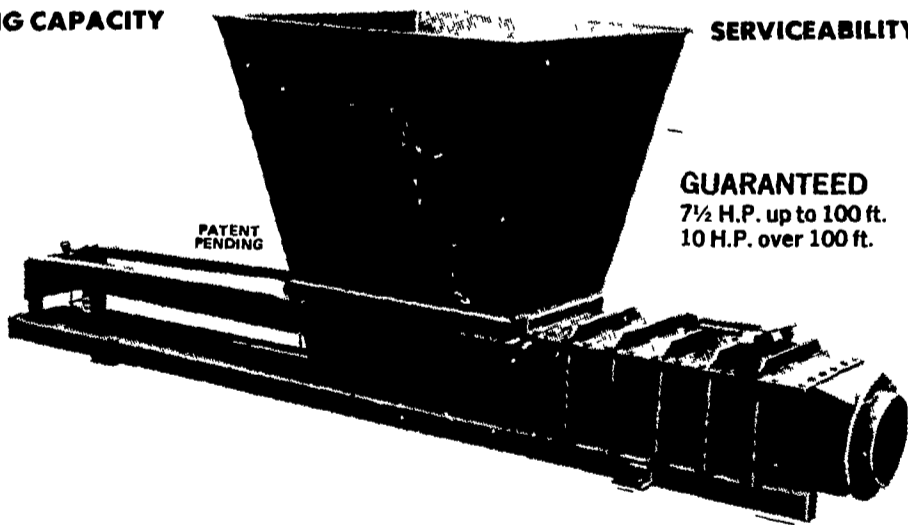
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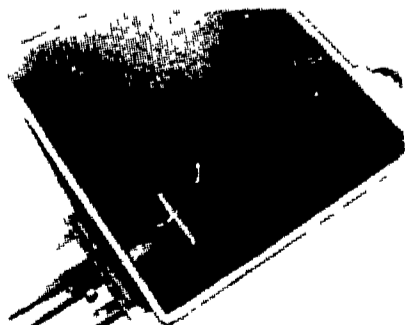
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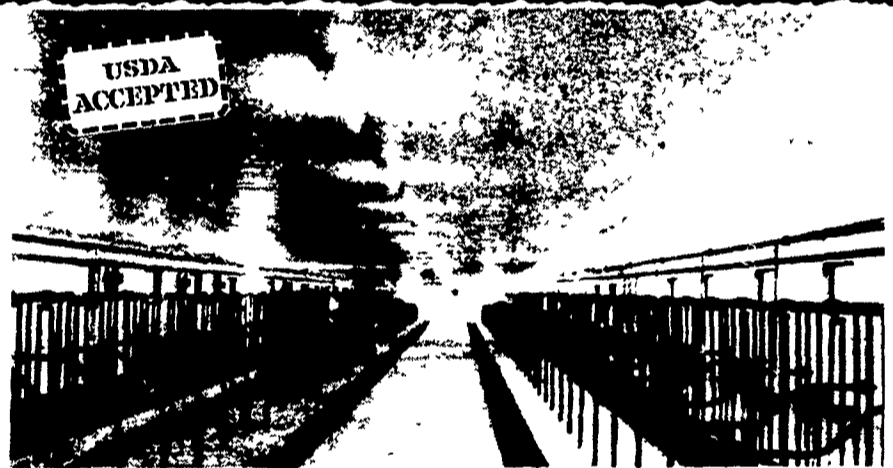
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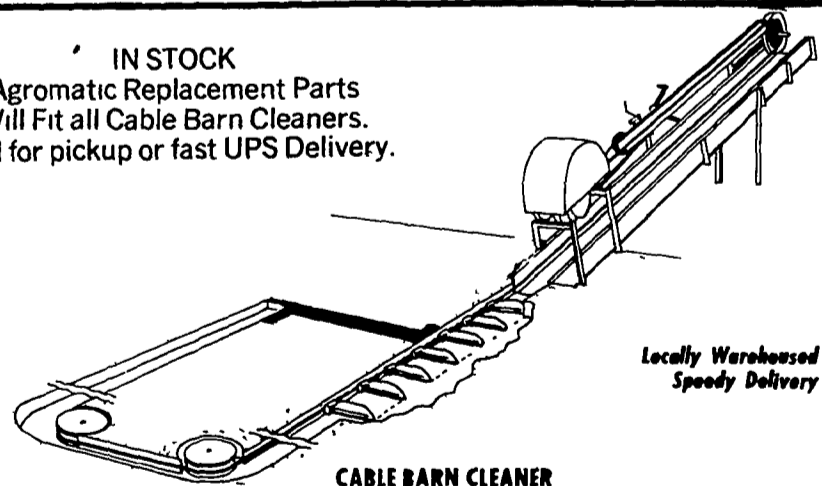
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