

Many changes loom in the future of farming

By JERRY WEBB

NEWARK, Del. — Some farmers don't like to admit it but, in general, and as a group, they are fairly conservative and reluctant to make big changes. So change has come to farming rather slowly over the past several decades. In the years ahead, however, a lot of changes will occur — not because farmers want them but because they will be forced into them.

Farm labor is one area where rapid change will occur due to new legislation. Anyone who follows the farm labor disputes in California or who knows about migrant labor working conditions in this area must realize that in time the laws will change.

By 1985 minimum wage laws and other legislation will cause farm labor prices

to go up dramatically. This will force changes in farm organization and operation.

In the past, farm labor has been given lower minimum wage rates and has often been exempted from general labor legislation. But farm experts in Washington say this can't last much longer. In fact, an agriculture department report predicts that in the coming decade farm workers will be brought under the same minimum wage provisions as non-farmers. They will also receive the same extra benefits. By 1985 a farm worker can expect the same wage rates, fringe benefits, workmens' compensation, unemployment insurance and employment conditions. When that happens, farming will change more and faster than at any time in its history.

One likely result, according to the report, will be increased polarization. "On the one hand, we will have the farm small enough for all the work to be done by the operator without hired labor, and on the other, the farm large enough to face the ever more complex problems and regulations that will fall on labor management."

More expensive labor will cause other problems for the already financially troubled farmer. Big farmers will get bigger, small operators will be stuck, so to speak, at the size where the farmer and his family can handle the work.

Along with these changes will come a sharp rise in assets and debts — accompanied by only modest increases in farm income. The trend will be to meet the burden of debt payments by

increasingly turning to leasing as opposed to ownership. The result will be that the farmer-owned share of assets, especially the more costly ones such as real estate, will decline.

More farm families will need to supplement their incomes with off-farm jobs, according to the report. Much of this nonfarm income will be earned by farm families in the lower gross sales classes, who in turn will use it to pay off debts and underwrite assets.

"Paradoxically," credit may be easier to come by for the small farmer than the larger one. Traditional lenders appear willing to provide funds to farmers with off-farm jobs. But for the large commercial farms, more capital may be solicited from new sources such as large city banks and

from old sources willing to change to accommodate the needs of large borrowers."

In the area of farm machinery, predictions are that by 1985 about 15 per cent more horsepower will be supplied by one-third fewer tractors — chiefly because larger, more powerful machines will be doing more of the work.

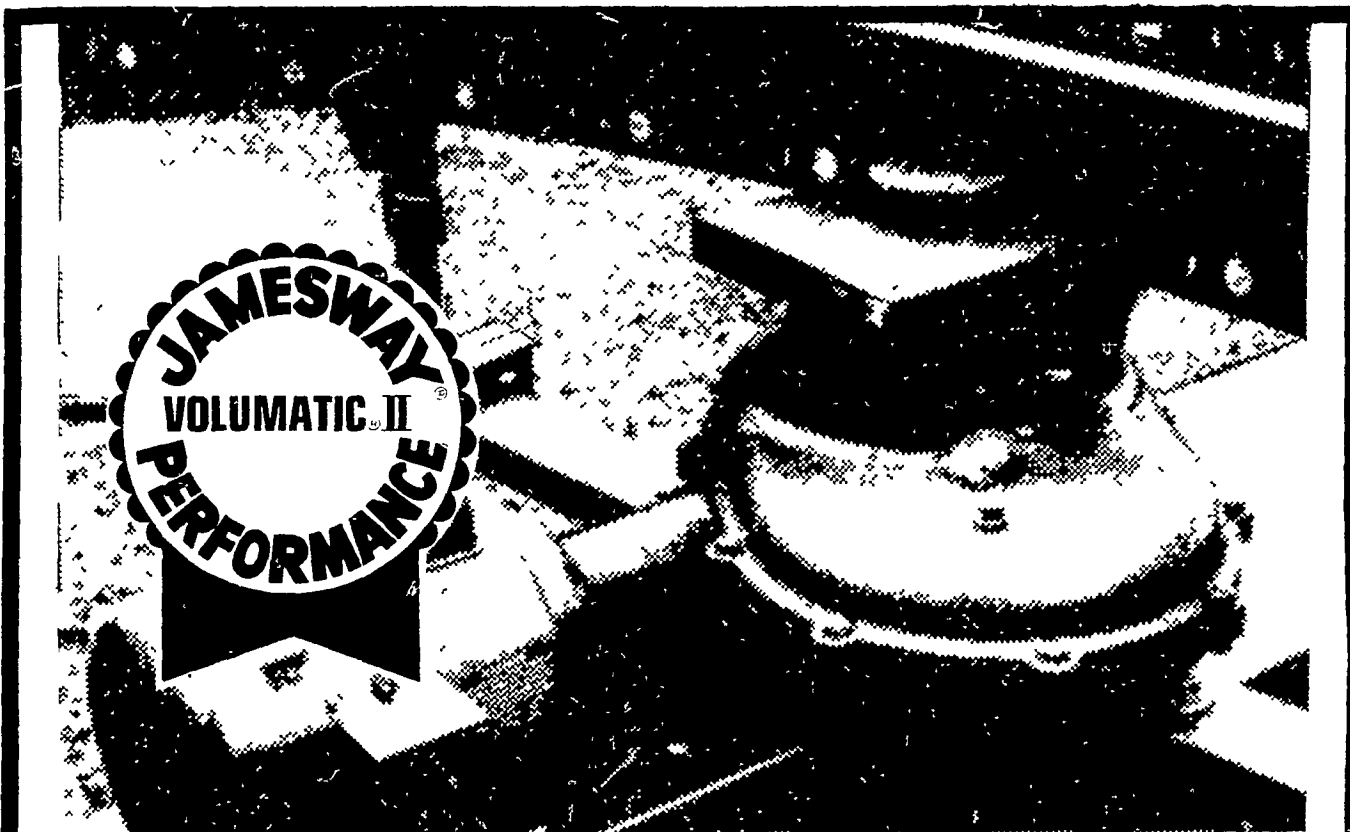
The environment will be a factor in pesticide technology. Environmental concerns will continue to bear upon the kind and quantity of pesticides used, with increased unit costs likely for certain chemicals needed for more selective treatment of weeds and insects.

"The controversy over land use is likely to have reached center stage by 1985. At the very least, there will be growing pressure for more direct government involvement in how land is used. Though our land supply is fixed, the amount is likely to be sufficient to produce the crops we'll need by 1985. Likewise, water — another vital natural resource — will still be

available to us in abundant quantities," according to the government information.

The big changes that will come to agriculture during the next 10 years won't be the kind that show as you ride down country roads. Those agricultural robots and high-rise hog houses are still a long way off. But there's just no question that economic pressures will cause drastic organizational changes. Obviously, any farmer who expects to hire outside labor is going to have to pay a pretty big price. Once that decision is met, he is then going to have to organize his business so that he can, first, afford to pay his workers and second, have enough left so that he can pay himself.

Those farmers who now work for a buck an hour or less are going to find it difficult paying a worker several times more than they are getting. If, on the other hand, they choose not to reorganize — to stay small and use family labor — they doom themselves to a life of low earnings or, at best, part-time farming.



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