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Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Every once in a while a new term slips into the agricultural vocabulary—it catches on and becomes part of the language. Here's one that might be worth sharing. The term is "grain desert."

If you've ever driven across Kansas in the summer, you know where such terminology probably originated. My first contact with that combination of words was in a news release that came across my desk from University of Illinois agricultural economist Folke Dovring. He says Illinois has turned into a grain desert and that's not good.

In his thinking, corn and soybeans, those high value crops that are so precious to American agriculture, are crowding out other economic opportunities.

The economist points out that it's more profitable for individual farmers to grow

these crops, but it's less economical for society as a whole to produce nothing but grain. He thinks the old ways with some grain crops to support a strong livestock enterprise were better—that livestock farming contributes more to the national product. And in some areas where vast fertile acres lend themselves well to grain production, livestock farming is gradually, but surely, disappearing.

There was a time not too many years ago when driving across Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, you found many livestock operations. In fact, most farmers fed some hogs and a few steers and maybe kept a few beef cows. Or, they were involved in dairying or some other livestock operation.

But with farm-size expansion and an emphasis on high cost farm machinery,

many farmers have preferred to get out of the livestock business and tear down old livestock buildings and fences to make room for the large tillage and harvesting machines.

As one Arkansas Delta farmer told me one time, "We don't keep anything around our place that will get sick or get out."

I'm afraid that philosophy has spread across much of agriculture, leaving these grain deserts. And believe me, they're not exclusive to Illinois or Kansas.

As Dovring points out, livestock production consistently produces about 50 per cent more national product per acre than cash grain farming. That means some of the best farmland in the nation is being used less intensively. And he says grain farming employs fewer people and uses fewer resources other than land. And by generating less income there's a negative influence on the tax base.

When you combine all those factors you realize the tremendous stress affecting some rural communities. Towns that once supported a thriving farming enterprise with a combination of grain and livestock are now grain areas only, and that means the old familiar feed store is no longer needed.

There are fewer people living on the land and that

means less business around the square. As farmers get bigger, they buy out other farmers and that reduces the population even more. Many of those large farmers go off to the larger metropolitan areas to do their shopping, to buy their farm supplies, and to sell their grain. And that spells trouble for those once-thriving communities.

Many of them have already turned into bedroom towns or retirement villages, and others are rapidly heading that way.

Obviously, our livestock is getting produced somewhere, there is no shortage of it.

If you look at the hog and poultry production cycles right now, there is a temporary shortage in beef, but that's not for lack of farmers. That's more a matter of economics and the time it takes to expand the nation's beef enterprise.

But livestock farming has left many of the traditional areas, moving to the south and west and concentrating in states that are not that well suited to grain production—states like Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and the more rugged parts of Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, and Arkansas.

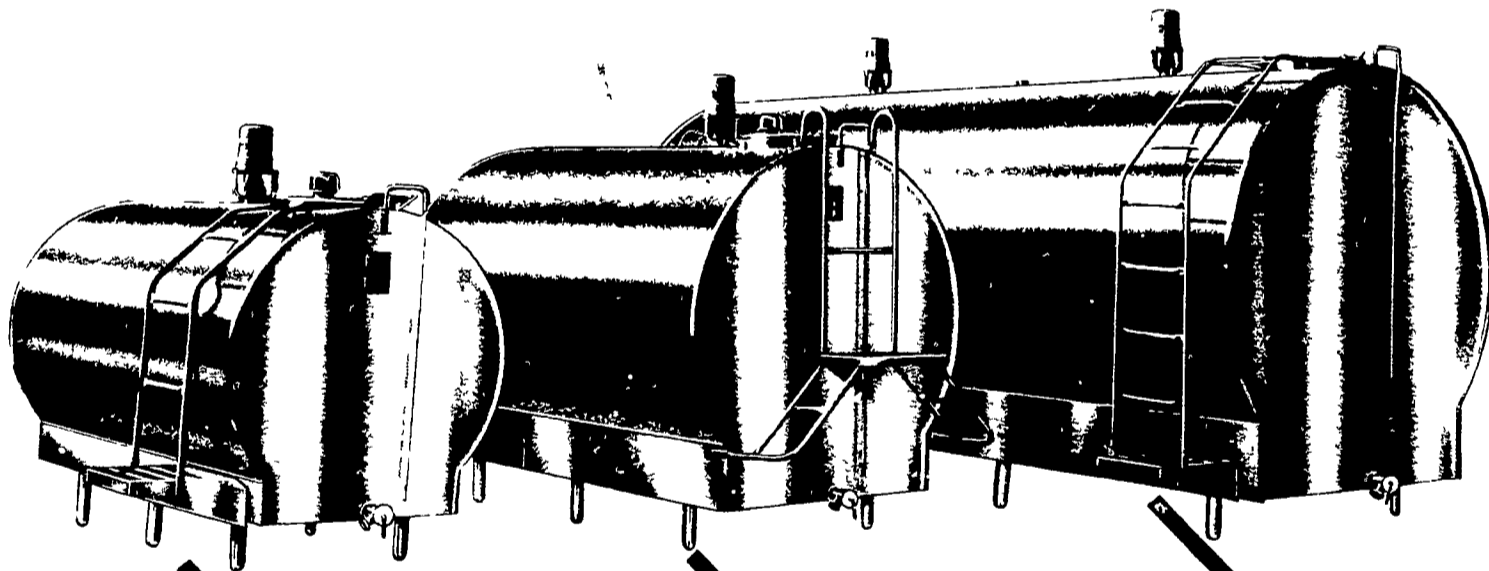
The Delmarva peninsula is blessed with the best of both worlds. We have our grain deserts, as anyone who has driven to the beach in July knows. And if you fly over that desert you notice little blocks where grain doesn't grow.

Those agricultural oases are fully occupied by the area's highly concentrated broiler industry—a livestock industry that requires very little space, but produces a lot of income. So in that sense the area has the best of both worlds—the strong corn/soybean combination and the heavy concentration of livestock in the form of broiler chickens. The grain feeds the birds, and the birds generate a high level of agricultural and nonagricultural prosperity.

There is still some livestock enterprise in the area. Dairying is quite important to many farmers and hog production is a

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