

*Delaware Ag College dean says*

# We've taken land for granted, now we must preserve it

DOVER, Del. — Prime agricultural land is the backbone of our strength as a nation and it's time we did something to protect it, Donald F. Crossan, dean of the University of Delaware's College of Agricultural Sciences told a gathering of farmers, developers and government officials at a recent extension-sponsored land use conference in Dover.

"We've always taken our farmland for granted," said Crossan, "but there's a growing awareness that this natural resource is being eroded."

Perhaps the oil crisis has finally caused us as a nation to realize that there's a limit to certain resources, he continued. We're just beginning to realize that the time could come — within our own children's lifetimes — when Americans can no longer boast of having the cheapest, most abundant food supply of any country in the world.

It's staggering to imagine what such a decline in our agricultural productivity would mean — the impact on food prices, U.S. purchasing power abroad, and our nation's general position as a world leader — if no major advances are made in food production to counter the loss of agricultural land, he said.

Why worry about this now when we're already producing surpluses? he asked.

Don't we have agricultural experiment stations and

extension services that are the envy of the world in the way they seek out and use new production knowledge to further boost yields?

During the past decade, said the ag college dean, we've suddenly become aware of the appalling rate at which productive land across the country is leaving agriculture each year.

Nearly four-fifths of America's available cropland is already being farmed. When that last 20 percent is cropped, we'll have reached the limit of this resource.

In 1974 when corn and wheat stocks fell dramatically in the U.S., food prices jumped, as did the world demand for food. And people suddenly started looking at the rate at which we were losing cropland.

An important fact emerged: between 1967 and 1975, about three million acres of rural land a year passed into urban use, or was covered with water.

What's more, for every acre urbanized, another acre was isolated by "leapfrog" development rendering it difficult to use agriculturally. This side effect is just as critical as the direct loss of farmland, Crossan stressed.

"Rural areas destined for future development often cease to provide a favorable environment for farming long before actual subdivision occurs. And isolated sectors soon lose the services needed to maintain

production agriculture," he said.

The recent concern over agricultural land use has resulted in action at the federal level, he said. President Carter highlighted it as a concern in an environmental message last year. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has sponsored a number of land use conferences and more are planned. And Congress is currently studying a proposed Agricultural Land Protection Act.

That Act would authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to study the impact of farmland loss on the national economy and on the nation's balance of trade.

It would also authorize funds for assistance to states to help them develop innovative approaches to farmland protection. This points up the fact that the loss of agricultural land has become a matter of national concern.

Some states recognized long ago that the irreplaceable loss of farmland was not in their best economic interest, Crossan continued.

Over two decades ago Maryland adopted property tax policies that afforded

preferential treatment for farmland.

Since then many other states including Pennsylvania and Delaware have adopted similar laws. But although successful in providing tax relief, many of these programs have not prevented the development of farmland for non-agricultural purposes.

During the 1960's and 70's some states began to assert direct control over land use. Two states, Hawaii and Oregon, have created special agricultural districts as part of their overall state land use programs.

Other states — and in some cases, local governments — have adopted other programs specifically designed to protect farmland.

In many instances, noted the ag college dean, voters have agreed to a particular program because they believed it was in the best national interest to assure a reliable food base. Or they felt the need to conserve land for environmental reasons, or felt the need for a sustained "open space", or some other reason.

In any event, through public meetings, discussion of alternative plans and fact-

finding residents of a large number of states have now worked out programs they consider appropriate for conditions in their own state.

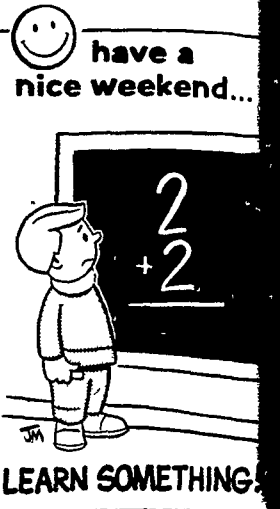
Where concern has been expressed over possible economic effects of farmland preservation on other sectors of the economy, it has been shown that states actually benefit economically when their agricultural sector is strong and commercial development occurs in harmony with farming needs.

No one has yet been able to assess the intrinsic value of farmland to the nation as a whole, Crossan said. We need to examine all the methods by which state or local governments can protect this resource fairly, affordably and permanently.

The challenge is great, but it's necessary to come to grips with it now so that informed citizens and policymakers can seek equitable solutions before the loss of agricultural land

becomes a full-blown crisis he said.

"Our purpose in holding public meetings on this issue," he concluded, "is to begin in Delaware the dialogue necessary for understanding the problem to help people examine the alternative and eventually find solutions that are acceptable to all concerned."



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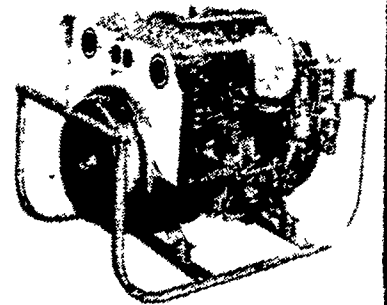
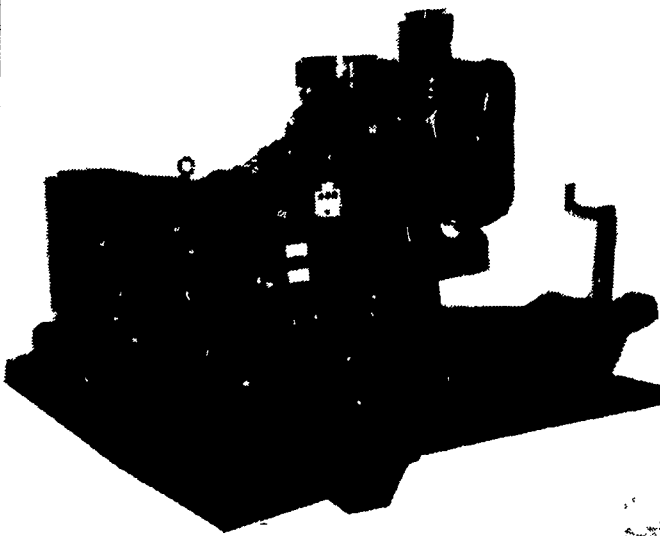
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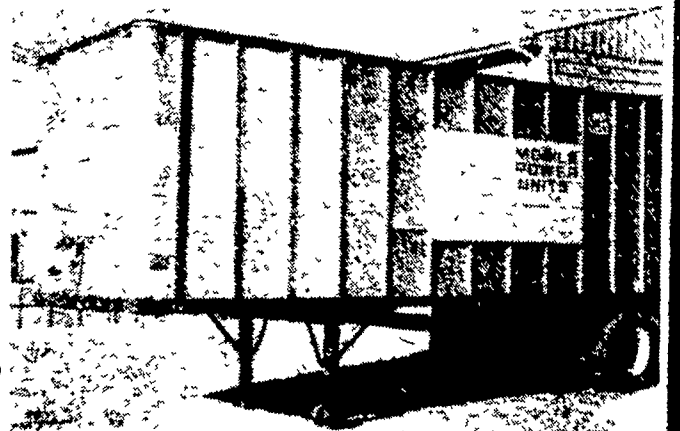
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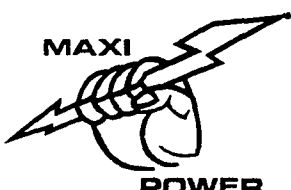
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