

Legislative roundup

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farms associated with 10 state mental hospitals.

Although the 10,700 acres in the farms could not be sold without the approval of both the House and the Senate, Mrs. O'Bannon's action calls for an April 30 cutoff, after which the farms would be transferred to the Department of General Services.

After that transfer is made, the way is clear for the sale of all machinery and equipment on the farms.

Another Wednesday visitor to the Capitol was William Nichol, of the Pennsylvania Holstein Association. He was conferring with DPW and General Services officials on conducting dispersal sales for the 1400 Holsteins on the state farms.

"We as an association don't want to see these herds dispersed," Nichol said. "But if they are going to be dispersed, we feel it's our job to help the state get the most for its investment with a well-run dispersal sale."

There are seven dairy herds on the ten farms, and Nichol was worrying about the logistics of having that many sales on short notice, probably sometime in May.

But he was more worried about spreading the herds far and wide. The herds have been valuable, he said, in helping to prove young sires. And the breeding programs have been carefully planned around some of the best AI sires on the market.

"Maybe half the dairy animals are grade

Holsteins," Nichol said. "But the other half are all registered, and all are good animals. I think it would be a shame to see the herds split apart."

Nichol was not at the Wednesday night meeting to talk about the mechanics of transferring the farms out of DPW hands. Secretary Hallowell and several of his staff were there. So was Walter Barron, Secretary of General Services, and three members of the House and Senate agriculture committees.

Thursday morning, Hallowell said his department would be working with General Services to make the best possible use of the farms. He wouldn't commit himself on the issue of whether or not the livestock and equipment on the farms would be sold, but did say they hoped to have the farms in operation over the summer.

One way that could be accomplished, he said, was by leasing the land to farmer operators.

Reno Thomas, chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, was somewhat more direct in his comments on the meeting, and on what he sees in store for the farms.

Some observers had felt Secretary O'Bannon had tromped harder on Thomas' toes than on anyone else's, but he didn't see it that way. "We had an agreement - a verbal agreement - that the institutional farms would keep operating until I could get a bill introduced that

would transfer these farms out of DPW and into the Department of Agriculture under a lands management commission.

"I got the bill, House Bill 1535, and we got it introduced, but it's now stuck in the appropriations committee, waiting for money. At this point, I don't think Secretary O'Bannon reneged on our agreement. She went out of the farm's mess, and nobody disagrees with her. She waited until we got our bill out of committee."

"But when she saw that bill going nowhere, she forced the issue."

Thomas, a swine breeder from Beavertown in Snyder County, is as concerned about the sale of the 5,000 hogs on the state farms as Bill Nichol is about the sale of the Holsteins.

And Thomas doesn't think the cows or the hogs will go on the auction block.

Thomas is confident that some way can be found to get the farms out of DPW, into General Services and thence to Agriculture without any sales of equipment or livestock.

One avenue may be by a direct order from the Governor. His thoughts on the matter won't be known, though, until he gets back from China in a week or so.

There are clear economic reasons for holding onto everything, Thomas believes. "These farms produce \$3 million worth of food a year," he said. "That's food that goes into the institutions themselves. And in addition to producing food, the people who work the farms also maintain the grounds of the hospitals.

They cut the grass, trim the hedges, shovel the snow - if the state has to contract for those services, I'd hate to be the one to pay the bill."

"The accountants say that the farms now are losing money. But I think some of the expenses that are being charged against the farms are overstated, and I think the value of the products being produced there are under-stated. And even with their lop-sided bookkeeping, the farms are still nearly self-sufficient."

"I think they could be a lot more than self-sufficient. And I think if the state had to buy the \$3.5 million worth of food grown on the farms, they might have to pay twice that much."



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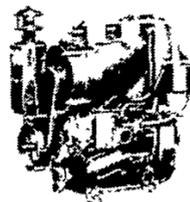
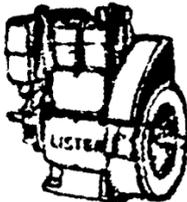
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