

# 5400 acres may sit idle if state doesn't act

**BY CURT HARLER**  
**HARRISBURG** — A total of 5400 acres of state owned land, capable of producing good crops, may sit idle this year unless some state action is taken soon.

The land is that controlled by the Welfare farm system. Having that land idle could mean a loss of over \$100,000 of potential rental income, or the loss of crops produced for the use of the institution inmates.

The land, at the moment still under the control of the Public Welfare Department, may or may not go to the state Agriculture Department. Depending on the timing of any transfer, the land may or may not be used for agriculture.

At present, it is unsure whether the land would be sold off, leased to individual farmers to plant, farmed by the Ag Department, or let fallow.

Welfare says at least two of the institutions will be divided into plots and rented to farmers this coming month.

If other land is to be sold, delay in disposing of the acreage means loss of tax revenue for local municipalities.

In addition to the farmland, there are number of

dairy cattle and other livestock involved. About half of the cows are Registered Holsteins.

A contract is in place with the state Holstein Association to disperse the seven dairy herds between May 12 and May 27.

Heavy animals will be slaughtered and used at the institutions. Lightweights will be sold at local auctions.

While confusion reigns, one thing seems certain: Welfare wants to be rid of those farms.

But the Welfare Department has done some seemingly strange things to farms which are to be sold off.

At Norristown, for instance, the Welfare Department spent about \$12,000 on a new milking system. They also made improvements on the silos there.

These capital improvements were made within the past several months. The milking system was completed this month.

Welfare's only justification was that the project had been started and apparently could not be stopped once the money had been set aside.

Welfare seems to see the problem ending for them

once the whole farm system is given, by the legislature, to someone else. That someone else may be the state Agriculture Department.

But at the moment, Agriculture has no power to do anything with the farms.

One of the holdups in resolving the problem is a lack of money in the Agriculture budget to allow PDA to run the farms.

The 3993 acres of good crop land, 400 acres of tillable soil which has not been farmed recently, and 992 acres of pasture may go to seed unless the funds are appropriated.

Depending on the timing of any supposed transfer, Agriculture will have to decide whether or not to use the land itself to feed the institution's inmates, or to lease it to farmers.

The final decision of the

Budget Office may make a big difference here. If the money is not given to Agriculture, the land could end up as a part of the General Services holdings, to be lumped with desks, snow shovels, and state buildings.

Questions have been raised about the value of leasing the land to outsiders. Such a move would generate funds for state coffers. Even at an average \$20 an acre, the state could realize \$108,000 from the 5400 acres.

But two further problems arise. If the state goes out of the food producing business, what penalty will it pay by having to produce food on the open market? Welfare says they hope to break even on food production costs by buying produce outside.

If the state were to continue producing food for inmates, hard-pressed

farmers could lose a good, local consumer for their products.

Whether or not the state will realize savings in salaries from the welfare farm employees also is argued.

It is difficult to run a profitable operation with 40 hour a week farmers, as Welfare found out. Agriculture may come to learn the same lesson.

Because the current farm workers are members of the state employees' union, they will not lose their positions. Regulations require the state to offer them other work within the system.

Another yet-unanswered question is how many of the welfare farms actually can be saved.

Two of the operations are in Pittsburgh and may not be worth the trouble of saving. Norristown, while ur-

banized, has a fair amount of good ground.

Since Welfare wants only to be rid of the problem, and nobody yet knows who will end up with the burden, it is unsure of how many operations will continue to be farmed.

Observers in the Agriculture Department indicate they will have to sit back and await developments.

But the seasons will not wait. Planting season will come and go without regard to the legislative calendar.

Meanwhile, many of those 5400 acres await further turning of the legislative wheels.

And General Services, hardly experts in farming, will have control of the lands until HB 1535 is shaken loose from the legislature and Agriculture can take over the farms.

## Extension slates sheep shearing schools

**CARLISLE** — The Penn State Extension Service will conduct two sheep shearing schools in this part of the state.

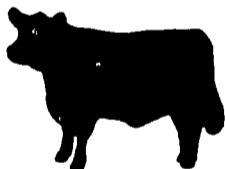
They will be held as follows: April 14 and 15 in Cumberland County, near Carlisle; and April 16 and 17 in York County, near York.

These are two-day shearing schools where interested persons will have a chance to shear several sheep. Both sheep and equipment will be provided for these schools.

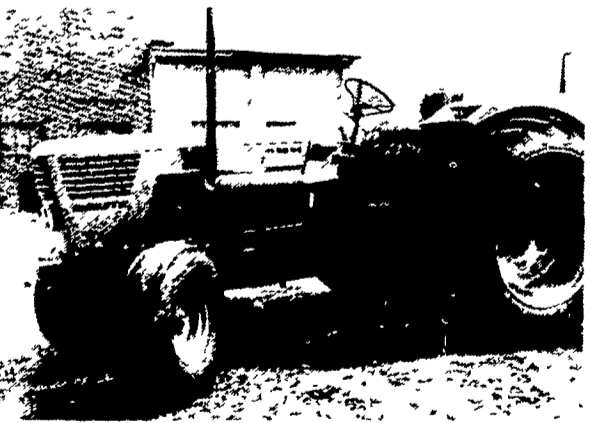
Advanced registration is required with Duane Dun-

can, County Agricultural Agent, 1100 Claremont Road, Carlisle. Phone 717/249-7220. He will accept registrations for both of the above shearing schools.

Interested persons should contact Duane Duncan soon as registrations will be accepted on a first-come, first-served basis.



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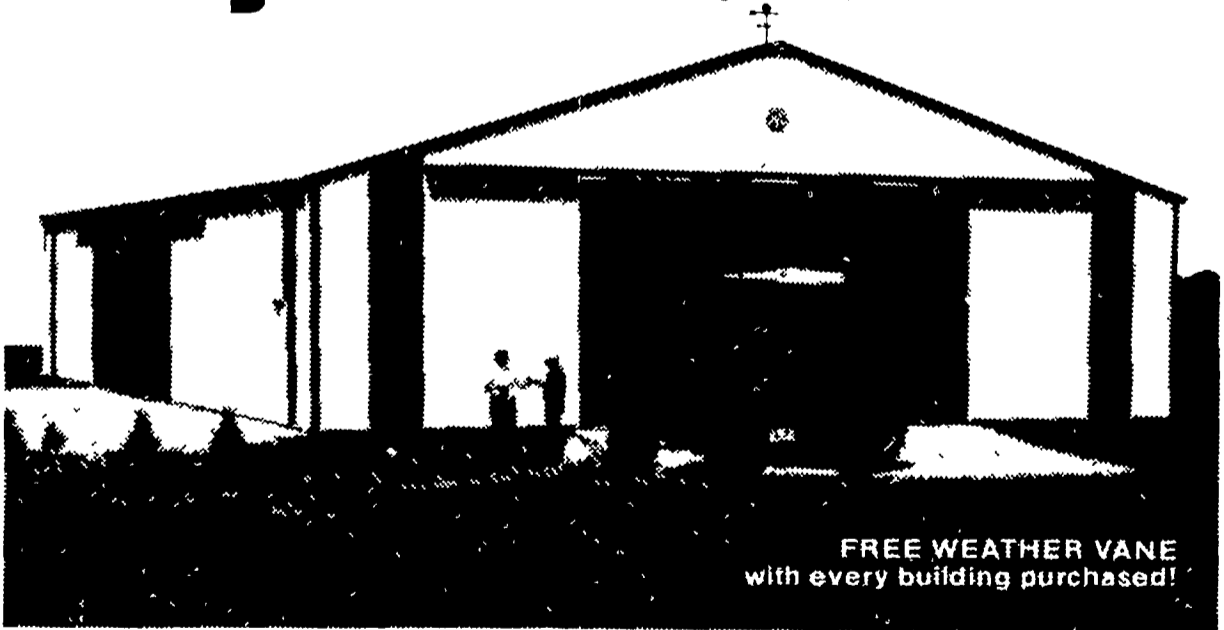
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