

Lehigh-Northampton farmers seek drought aid

BY DICK ANGLESTEIN
GERMANSVILLE —

"You can walk into some of the fields, pull out a stalk and not even find something as big as a cherry."

With these words Lehigh County potato farmer Elwood Handwerk is describing this year's crop that has been devastated by the summer's searing heat and drought.

And Handwerk is not alone.

That's why a group of Lehigh and Northampton County farmers got together yesterday and met in an emergency meeting with Congressman Donald Rutter to see what kind of federal help might be possible to help them through their current serious situation.

A group of some 75 farmers from the two counties turned out for the meeting at Holiday Inn East, Bethlehem. Also attending was State Ag Secretary Penrose Hallowell.

The farmers asked that credit restrictions be relaxed by the Farmers Home Administration for disaster loans. They asked that farmers be permitted to go directly to FmHA for 5 percent disaster money instead of being required to be turned down by two

commercial lending institutions first.

"This is discriminatory against the successful farmer," they said.

It was estimated that under present restrictions about 95 percent of farmers would not qualify for the FmHA money.

The group also stressed that the ASCS is discriminatory against some crops, such as fruit and potatoes.

It was estimated that losses in Lehigh County alone may run about \$30 million — a figure earlier attributed to the two counties.

The owner of Mohr Orchards estimated his losses at \$1.5 million alone.

The farmers asked if grant money was possible for Hurricane Agnes in 1972 why can't similar money be made available now.

"Drought is not as dramatic as a flood," Hallowell commented.

The secretary said he plans to call together the Senate and House ag committees next week to assess the situation and then see what can be done.

Congressman Rutter plans to meet with the head of the House Ag Committee to determine what may be

possible at the federal level.

"Although it's a short-term problem, we must find some way to help farmers through this year," Rutter said.

"If we don't, the face of farming in the Lehigh Valley may be changed forever."

Handwerk explains that his father is over 90 years old and has never seen a year like this one. The prolonged dry spell took its toll of the potato crop, but it was that spell of 100-degree plus temperatures which put the finishing touches on the struggling plants.

"Potatoes just can't take temperatures like that," Handwerk said.

"Why the ground was hot to depths of 10 inches."

Handwerk is digging Superiors and the harvest is running about 70 hundredweight to the acre, well below a third of a normal crop. And some land was even irrigated.

"We didn't make anything last year on a normal crop, so you can see what we're facing now," according to Handwerk.

In neighboring Northampton County, it's a similar situation.

Russell Becker, of near Bath, local PFA president, said that the potato harvest is running from half a crop to less than a third.

He explained that Superiors yield about 300 hundredweight to the acre normally and the harvest is averaging between 60 and 70 to the acre.

And these are not Number 1 potatoes. Many are quite small and when you pull out the 1's the yield is well less than a third.

The early varieties are yielding the best, but still well below normal. These were farther along in growth when the drought and heat set in.

He explained the county is spotty, with the extreme upper section having the best yields. But the serious situation is quite widespread.

As another example of the effects of the drought and heat, he pointed to a neighbor in corn where only

70 bushels was taken off two acres.

"There are fields, where we won't even get that," he said.

Is it any wonder that some fields, both corn and potatoes won't even be harvested.

For the lone truly bright spot in the state for potatoes, you must go to Potter County. There potato grower Everett Blass Jr. says the crop is good and the quality excellent.

He's digging Norchips and they're running 200 to 250 hundredweight to the acre.

"We were right on the borderline between the dryness to the east and the wet weather to the west," he said.

"We got just enough rain just at the right time."

He's located about eight miles outside of Couderport

In other areas, like Lancaster County, potato yields are running generally between the good Potter County figures and the disastrous Lehigh and

Northampton yields.

Across the country, it has not been a good potato year. The few exceptions are Maine, the upper and lower reaches of the Red River Valley and the irrigated areas of Oregon.



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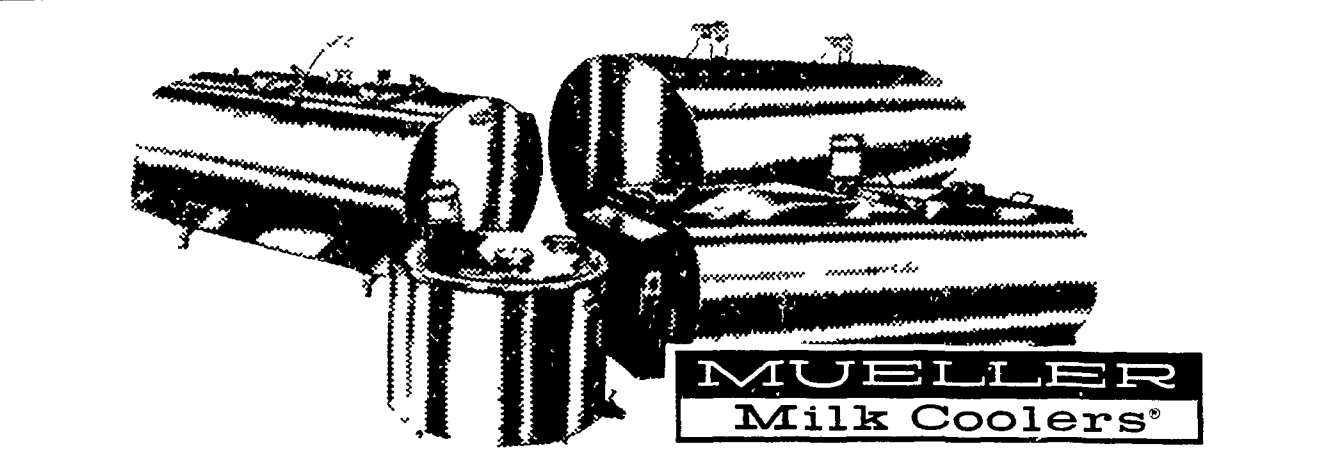
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