

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

"Fewer, Larger U S Farms By Year 2000 and Some Consequences" — that's a summary of agriculture's future and it's also the title of a new publication released by the Department of Agriculture.

The message in it is clear — big farms are getting bigger and the trend will increase.

According to the publication, "Large farms are clearly the growth sector of U S agriculture. While the total number of farms will decline by a third, the number of large farms with sales of \$100,000 and more will nearly quadruple."

In 1974, those super farms accounted for only five percent of all farms, or a total of 150,000 units. But by the turn of the century, Department of Agriculture economists are predicting that a third of all farms will be in the super farm category.

Before giving up on the small farm, you must first consider the Department of

Agriculture's definition of a farm and then realize that these are national averages. The situation varies considerably from state to state.

The latest definition of a farm as described by the Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Census says it's a place with sales of at least \$1000 in agricultural products in the previous year. That's a change brought about in 1974.

Prior to that, a farm was defined as any place of 10 or more acres, with at least \$50 in agricultural sales, or any place of less than 10 acres with at least \$250 in agricultural sales.

So, by definition, a number of farms were dropped from the census role. When you think about it, the new definition of \$1000 in agricultural sales brings a lot of large vegetable gardens into the farm category.

When you're considering the impact of large farms, it's more a matter of what they produce than it is how many of them there are. The

Department of Agriculture economists think that by the year 2000 those big farms that account for about a third of all farm units will actually produce almost 96 percent of all farm output.

That leaves about four percent of total production for the other two-thirds of the farming units.

Cutting through USDA jargon, it simply means that fewer and fewer, larger and larger farms are going to be producing more and more of our food. While the other guys — that four percent classified as less than large — will still include perhaps a million-and-a-half farmers they won't produce very much.

Most of the decline in farm numbers over the next 20 years will come from small farms — those with less than \$20,000 in annual sales. USDA thinks there may be only half as many small farms at the end of the century, but they will still constitute more than half of all farms. Of course, those small farms will be operated mostly by part-timers who consider farming a supplemental income, a way of life, or a combination of both.

If you want to blame the trend in bigness on something, the Department of Agriculture gives you three choices — inflation, economies of size, and new technology. That means that farmers can lower their production costs per unit of output by increasing in size.

It takes big money to afford the new technology

equipment and systems and that means large-scale to make it work. Big farms can also take advantage of new technology quicker and reap larger returns from it.

But before you curse technology for its impact on small farmers, remember it's the nation's food supply that's at stake. While preserving a way of life may be considered important, it's not paramount. And given the choice between fewer farmers and relatively low-priced food and lots of farmers and expensive food, you know what most of us will pick.

As stated previously in this space, there may be a definite limit to the growth of large farms in the East. There are some big farms now, but future expansion is going to be tough because of the characteristics of our farmers.

Those with big farm ideas may find it very difficult and prohibitively expensive to take on expanded farming operations.

So while nationally the parade of big farms, big equipment and big farmers continues, locally we just might be seeing a little leveling off in that growth curve.



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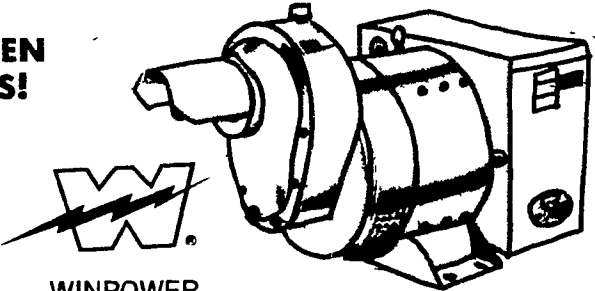
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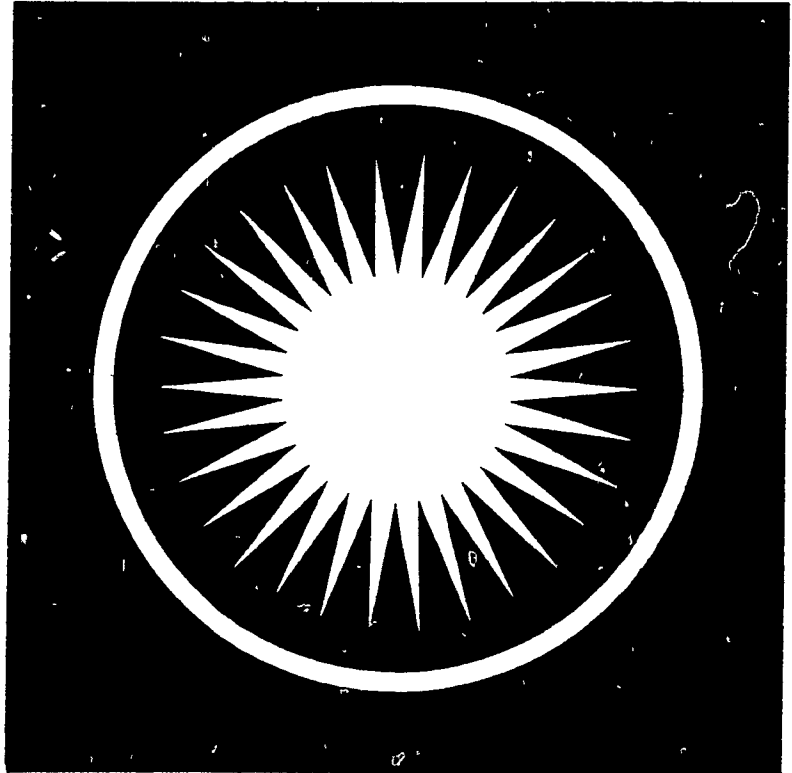
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