

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Farm equipment is getting bigger and more expensive, and that is changing some of the traditional ways farmers operate.

Instead of owning every last piece of equipment that's needed to care for a modern farm, many big operators, and some that are not so big, are looking to leasing and custom operators as a way of getting out from under the heavy burden of farm equipment ownership.

Back in the good old days, an enterprising young farmer would buy the necessary tools of agriculture for a few hundred dollars. Granted, that was a lot of money in those days but it wasn't that hard to get started. Now a

moderate size beginner is looking at a farm equipment debt of a couple of hundred thousand dollars. And that, combined with today's inflation and high interest rates, is almost too much.

Department of Agriculture figures indicate farm equipment costs now account for about one-fourth of total production costs on the farm and that's up considerably from just 10 years ago.

USDA economist Lloyd Biser says rising costs are squeezing all farmers, but especially those who started farming in the past few years and those who borrowed capital recently to expand.

When the squeeze is really on, he points out, it's a lot easier to lease

a special piece of equipment that's needed only occasionally, rather than face the high cost of ownership.

To give some idea of what's happening in the lease business, Biser points out that farmers spend about 10 percent of their total expenditures for farm machinery on equipment leases and custom work. Popular lease items include large tractors, expensive tillage equipment, planters, trucks, even combines.

Custom work has been around for generations. It used to be more of a work-swapping sort of thing, with one farmer providing an extra tractor or a planting rig in exchange for another farmer's help at threshing time. Or maybe the first farmer in the neighborhood to purchase a corn picker would harvest for the neighbors at a predetermined rate per acre.

Custom work has gotten a lot more sophisticated these days with some operators limiting their farming to custom work only.

A lot of indicators are pointing to this specialized kind of farming where in the future certain services will be performed by those who are specifically equipped to do it and have special knowhow.

Such things as grain harvesting, planting and chemical application might all be done by custom operators, who would maximize their use of expensive equipment and special skills and would relieve the farmer of the burden of equipment ownership.

It has long been an agricultural dilemma for the farmer to own costly machines that were used only a few days a year.

The combine is the classic example of that. A good one now costs as much as \$100,000 and can be used for only one purpose — to harvest grain. That means a few days or a few weeks of operation a year. The rest of the time it sits around depreciating and costing money.

In the days of horsepower, a farmer would own a good team of horses and a wagon, a plow, a disk, a cultivator, and a grain binder. That might be the sum total of his equipment inventory. That team of horses provided the power for plowing, planting, cultivating, and harvesting. A custom thresher would take care of the specialized harvesting job.

Then tractors were invented. Some of those same old pieces of horse equipment were hooked on behind them to do the same kinds of jobs — simply replacing the horses. But farm machinery got more sophisticated and tractors got larger and special tractor tools were invented and combines replaced threshing machines, and suddenly every farmer in the community owned several tractors, a full range of tillage equipment, a corn picker, a

combine, and other special equipment.

Most of it sat in the shed or out in the barn lot most of the time.

Farmers always have justified that expensive equipment because of the timeliness factor. They must have the tools they need when the weather conditions are right to do the job.

What would happen, they ask, if they had to wait for a custom operator to plant their corn or harvest their barley?

A day or two difference might mean a crop failure. And yet grain has been harvested in the western states that way for years. Custom operators, who start in the south and work their way north proceed as the crop ripens so everybody gets the harvest about when it's needed.

Enterprising farmers who are having a tough time in today's farming game are finding new ways to solve this equipment dilemma.

Some of them bitterly resent being ruled by the very machines that are supposed to be serving them. And so they're getting rid of this burden through leases, custom applicators, work swapping, and other devices aimed at easing the crunch and allowing them to farm and still make a little money.



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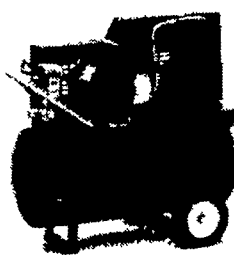
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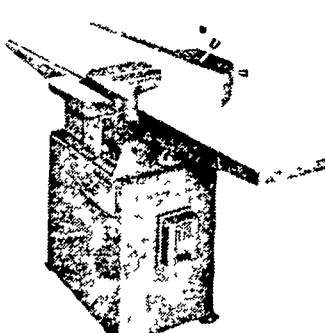
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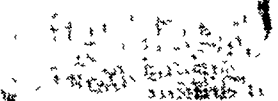
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