

Del. soybeans snatching cropland from corn

BRIDGEVILLE, Del — A 20-year analysis of corn and soybean production in Delaware shows that recently corn has been losing acreage to soybeans.

Between 75,000 and 100,000 acres have gone out of corn production in favor of soybeans over the last four

years, according to University of Delaware extension agronomist William H. Mitchell, who compiled the data.

Before 1977, acreage in the two crops tended to run roughly parallel, with the lead shifting from one to the other depending on

price and demand. Both grains are used to feed Delmarva broiler flocks.

Mitchell says that some farmers may have been switching to soybeans because they think this is a cheaper crop to grow than corn. Others may favor soybeans because they think they're less susceptible to drought than corn.

Neither of these theories proves out too well in practice, however.

With the credit crunch, production costs have become very important. Extension Crops marketing specialist Carl German estimates that it now costs about \$250 to grow an acre of dry land corn, assuming a 100-bushel yield.

Soybeans cost about \$50 less to row, mainly because they require less fertilizer.

Opting to grow beans instead of corn strictly on the basis of production costs may result in rather marginal savings, however, says German.

He says he feels farmers who base their cropping decisions on production costs alone may be overlooking the comparative advantage of the two crops on the futures market. Those who do this could be shortchanging themselves.

Mitchell questions the popular theory that soybeans withstand drought better than corn. Rather,

he says, soybeans mature at a time when there's a greater likelihood of rainfall.

The critical month for water on Delmarva. Soybeans need water during pod set and fill in August and September, historically wetter months in this part of the country.

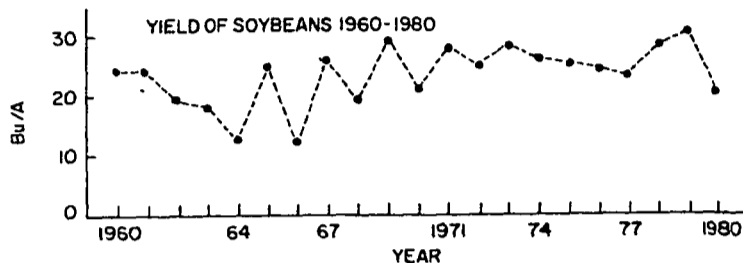
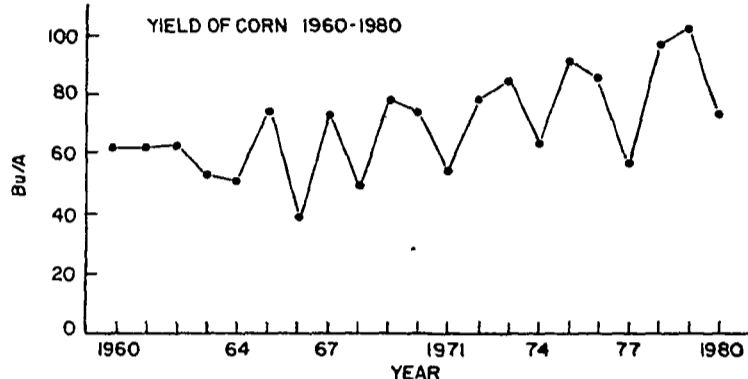
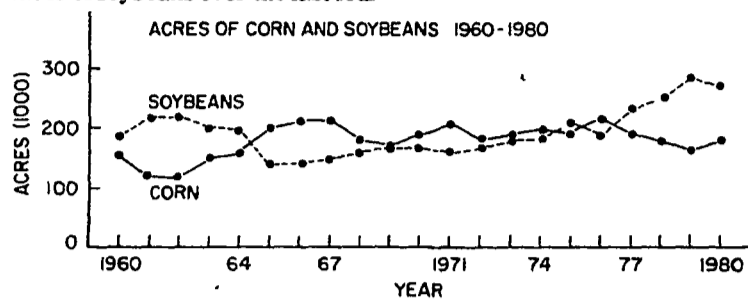
During last year's drought, Mitchell says soybeans didn't do a bit better than corn. But farmers had less money invested in their beans. German adds that this did not necessarily mean that they made or lost any more money.

Ironically, acreage trends for corn and soybeans are running in the opposite direction from yields. Since 1973, the average soybean yield in Delaware has declined steadily, except for two years.

Corn yields, on the other hand, have been rising in a pattern marked by one poor year followed by two good ones, but up about two bushels every four years.

While soybeans at their best haven't done much better than they did 10 years ago, the state's average corn yield even after last summer's drought was still above

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Delaware soybeans appear to be taking over corn land in spite of corn's better yield record.

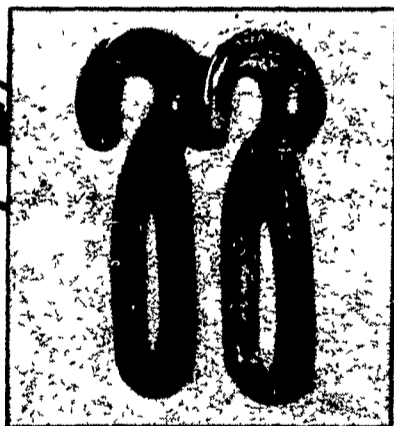
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