



Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Too few for comfort

Farms are getting larger and fewer. So are the firms that supply them and the firms that buy what those farms produce.

A few weeks back I wrote about problems in the meat packing industry, with a handful of firms controlling most of the market for beef cattle in some parts of the country. That trend is affecting

other farm markets.

It's especially evident on the Delmarva peninsula, where a system of integrated broiler production dominates the area's multi-million dollar broiler industry. There isn't one flock of broiler chickens grown on the peninsula that isn't involved in this complex system that's controlled

by a handful of companies.

And that's in contrast to 30 years ago when any farmer who wanted to grow a flock of broilers and either sold them through the poultry auction at Selbyville or directly to one of the many poultry processors operating in the area at that time.

But changes in the industry over the past couple of decades have ended all that. Now farmers who want to grow broilers must first get contracts with one of those broiler firms. Then they're told how many broilers they can grow and what they will be paid for their efforts. In fact, the farmers don't even own the chickens during their short visit on the farms.

That's part of the integrated system. The baby chicks are hatched in the company hatchery, delivered to the farm in company trucks, fed company feed, and are gathered up by company chicken catchers and processed in company plants.

The same thing is happening on the supply side of farming, with fewer and fewer firms controlling those things that farmers need. A few large companies produce

virtually all of the farm machinery. A handful of companies control the various forms of energy that farmers must rely on. Chemicals, so essential to modern agriculture, are produced and sold by fewer and fewer firms each year.

Farm pesticides are a prime example. Only a few companies account for the lion's share of the farm pesticide business. In 1966, the top four firms in the farm pesticide industry accounted for one-third of total farm pesticide purchases. But 10 years later, the top four accounted for two-thirds of the market.

Two factors are accounting for most of this increased concentration, according to a U.S. Department of Agriculture economist. Ted Eichers says rising research and development costs and increased government regulations make it virtually impossible for the small companies to hang on. And it's not easy for the big companies either. The

costs of developing new pesticides and getting and keeping label clearance is astronomical.

Consider this: In the last decade the number of chemical compounds that companies tested to find marketable pesticides rose from an average of 6,500 annually in 1970 to 84,000 in 1978. During that same period, the average number of new pesticides actually registered for use fell from 10 to only 2 per year.

Here's another figure: In the late 1960's the 30 leading pesticide manufacturers were spending a total of about 60 million dollars a year on research and development. By the late 1970's that figure had increased to 290 million dollars.

What this means, according to Eichers, is that well established companies with marketable pesticides can continue to make money while going through the agonizing process of developing new pesticides. But it's virtually

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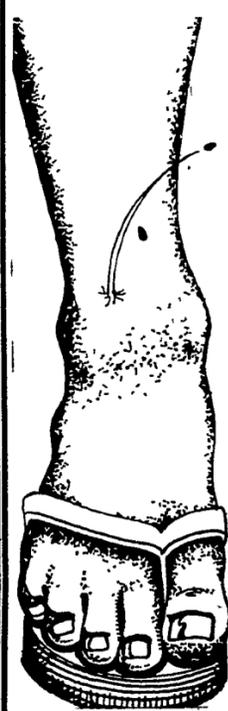
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