

*How tight is security for first corn crop report?*

# The USDA even wires and seals the drapes



Les Houck, left, of Agri-Broadcasting, New Holland, interviews Bill Kibler, chairman of the Crop Reporting Board.



Secretary of Agriculture John Block (left photo) awaits first corn crop report, while visiting top ag editors snap his photo. Bill



Leshner, assistant secretary for economics, pours over some statistics as aides look on.

BY LES HOUCK

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — How does it feel to be among the first dozen or so "locked-up" people in the world to know the size of the projected U.S. corn harvest.

It kinda feels like knowing that the top roll is about to come up on a slot machine at Atlantic City and you just run out of coins.

Or, it could be like knowing that those prime 50 acres next door can be bought privately for a song and your banker says no credit because you're over-extended.

I may be exaggerating a bit concerning such feelings but they give a good idea of how I and a selected few other agricultural editors and broadcasters felt last Friday when we were literally locked up by the USDA for a day until the initial crop report was given on the expected record U.S. corn harvest.

The security measures are extraordinary and must rival those that are taken when the Big 3 political leaders get together for a summit conference.

For example:

—All the window blinds in the statistic reporting wing of the USDA building are drawn and sealed with a wire and lead seal. This is to guard against anyone going to a window and hand-signaling the crop figures to someone outside.

—All passage ways but one are sealed off and it is guarded. Only people with proper credentials are permitted access.

—No one with passes is permitted back out until after 3 p.m. — the closing time for the stock exchanges.

—Bill Kibler, chairman of the Crop Reporting Board, and a representative of the Secretary of Agriculture, jointly go to pick up the mailed-in reports from the various states. Each carries a different key and it takes both to open the box. An armed security guard accompanies them.

—As they're picking up the reports, a team of electronic experts "sweeps" the locked-up area to make certain there are no "bugs" or other listening or sending devices.

—Once you're inside the locked-up area, you're literally cut off completely from the outside world.

—All of the elevators are shut off and the telephones disconnected.

The day of the initial corn crop report actually begins at 3:30 a.m. for employees of the Statistical Reporting Service.

The employees are briefed during the wee hours of the morning and only then told which commodity they will be working on — corn, soybeans or whatever.

The same people do not work on the same commodity all the time. People are randomly rotated among the commodities.

It's kinda like the teams that worked on the atom bomb during World War II. Each worker became familiar with only one small part of the overall Manhattan Project and never even knew what the final item was he was working on.

And security continues in the locked-up room even during the issuance of the crop report. Conspicuous by his apparent unconcern with what is being said is the alert young man usually in his mid to late-30's, dressed in the conservative suit with the plain tie whose eyes are trained to never quit "wandering" around the room.

Last Friday, the main commodities of concern were corn and soybeans, which explains the need for the extra security.

Anyone having exact advance knowledge that it's definitely going to be a record corn crop, despite the mid-West drought, and a near record bean crop, which was somewhat of a surprise, could literally clean up in the commodities futures markets.

We were told how the crop counts

are made among the 30,000 farmers who supply information for the crop reports.

Concerning corn, emphasis was placed by a speculative study group on the seven major states which grow about three-fourths of the corn in the U.S.

Field workers who actually walk the fields are told exactly how many steps they should take from the side of the field and how many steps from the end of the field. They use this same specified plot from the time the corn plant begins to peek through the ground until after the combines have cut their way through.

For Friday's report, the field workers had to measure each ear of corn in the plots. Why? Because a difference of two-tenths of an inch in length of an ear can amount to a difference of three bushels per acre in yield.

It was noted that there is a changing trend in the way farmers are cooperating with supplying information. Previously, the larger farmers were more receptive to giving the information. Now, the big boys are holding back more and the smaller farmers are more receptive to help.

Kibler explained that 95 percent of farmers take the time to work closely with the Crop Reporting Service.

Most farmers, he explained, know that an accurate harvest report is essential for all farmers to help them determine how much of their crop should be stored, fed or marketed immediately, or how much should be planted next year, or how much it may cost to buy feed for livestock during the coming winter.

The Crop Reporting Service is

very proud to be a non-political branch of the USDA, Kibler said. And the employees take great pride in being able to provide an accurate, unbiased report.

No one, not even the Secretary of Agriculture, can get advance information before that report is released in the locked-up room, he stressed.

And what about the future?

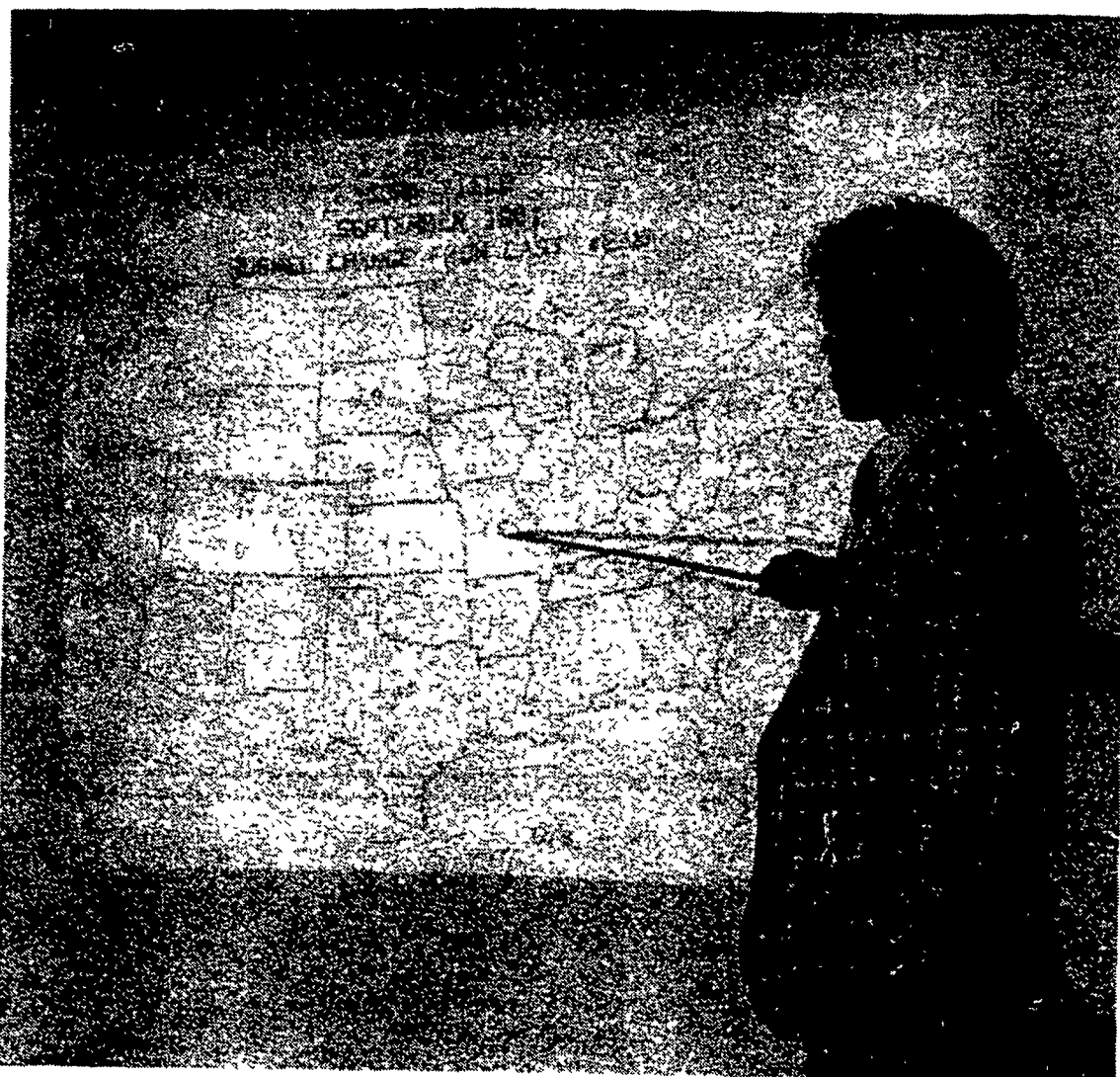
Well, Charles Caudill, director of the Statistical Research Division, says that satellites will play an increasingly important role in counting crops.

One of the new satellites can photograph corn fields in Iowa under cloud cover at night and tell the difference between corn and soybeans. But it can't tell the difference between corn and a 50-foot wide strip of trees.

But, Caudill stressed, no information is more valuable than that gathered by the field workers in the farmers' fields.

Was my trip to Washington with people like the editors of Farm Journal and Successful Farming to see the crop reporting procedure worthwhile?

I was convinced beyond any shadow of doubt that nowhere in the world is information more accurately collected or more closely guarded than in the Crop Reporting Service of the USDA.



Gary Nelson, of the Crop Reporting Service, explains map showing expected corn harvest by state. He's pointing to Nebraska where yield is expected to be up 55 percent over last year. Pennsylvania is up 18 percent. Total for U.S. is up 16.1 percent over 1980.

