

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Painting an unimportant farming picture

It may come as a surprise to some of the proponents of local agriculture, but there isn't one county on the Delmarva peninsula that depends on farming, according to a new U.S. Department of Agriculture report.

In fact, there are only 700 counties in the whole United States that depend on farming, if you use the Department of Agriculture's definition. That's in sharp contrast to 30 years ago when there were 2,000 such counties.

While it's easy to quarrel with USDA's definition of dependence on farming, it's a mistake to overlook the reality of declining political power within these counties.

Let's look at how the Depart-

ment of Agriculture defines farming counties, and perhaps then we can better understand this whole business of dependence. USDA considers a county as farming if that enterprise is a leading source of income. To be that, it must account for 20 percent or more of proprietor and labor income for that county.

When this rule is applied to all counties in the U.S., five groups emerge according to changing dependence on farming. These are: consistently farming counties, farm loss counties, formerly farming counties, nonfarm counties, and a nonexclusive category called overshadowed counties, where a large farm sector is eclipsed by even larger

nonfarm economic activities.

There are no counties on the Delmarva peninsula classified as consistently farming counties where at least 20 percent of labor and proprietors' income is derived from farming. There are, however, two overshadowed counties — Kent and Sussex in Delaware — that are in the top 20 percent of U.S. farming counties, but farm income is still overshadowed by income from other sources. The rest fall into a category labeled "other counties."

Looking at the farm dependence issue on a regional basis, it's easy to demonstrate that the northeast is losing its agricultural dependence, and along with it, its agricultural political power. In 1950 there were 33 counties in New England and the Mid-Atlantic states that received at least 20 percent of proprietor and labor income from farming. Now there is only one.

That's not to say that farming is unimportant in all but one county in the northeast, it just says that farming is not as important as a source of income as some other things. And you must remember we're looking at county income and county averages. If more than 20 percent of the county income was farm related, then that's considered a consistently farming county. If the figure is less than that, then it's classified as something else.

The Department of Agriculture analysts say a large share of the dependence on farming vanished in the 1950s. A map of the United States showing those counties that depended on farming in 1950 is almost solid black. Throughout the midwest and west there were farm counties with scattered exceptions, primarily in the northeast, north central, and the desert areas of the southwest. But today that map is almost white, signaling the absence of farming counties.

Analysts say the half-million farms in consistently farming counties average 585 acres, compared to the 440 acre U.S. average. The contain 23 percent of the nation's farms, had 31 percent of U.S. farmland, and 33 percent of all farms with more than \$40,000 in sales. These counties harvested 53 percent of the U.S. wheat average, 47 percent of the land in other small grains, 41 percent of the sorghum acreage, 38 percent of the land in corn, and 33 percent of the land in soybeans. Nearly 78 percent of the farm operators in consistently farming counties reported farming as their principle occupation.

About 30 percent of the jobs in consistently farming counties were on farms in the mid-seventies, but farming provided less than four percent of total employment in the remaining counties. And not surprisingly government, including state, federal and local,

and service firms were the largest employers of wage and salary workers in all county groups.

Here are some final statistics from that survey: Counties with a continuing dependence on agriculture tend to be sparsely settled, containing only four percent of the nation's population. Population in the consistently farming averaged 11,800 per county, and only 8,700 in the farm loss group, compared to 27,200 in the formerly farming group, and over 150,000 in the nonfarm group. Population growth also was slowest in consistently farming and farm loss counties.

What does it all mean? Well, from a political power point of view, it's pretty obvious that the number of congressional districts where farming is a major source of income are few and far between. That makes it more and more difficult for the remaining farmers to get their points of view listened to. And it means it's harder for farmers to rally the vote when it comes to a lot of other issues, including zoning, farmland preservation, waste management, and dozens of other issues that are brought before the public for consideration.

The government survey doesn't say that the Delmarva peninsula is not an important farming area. It just says that farming is not as

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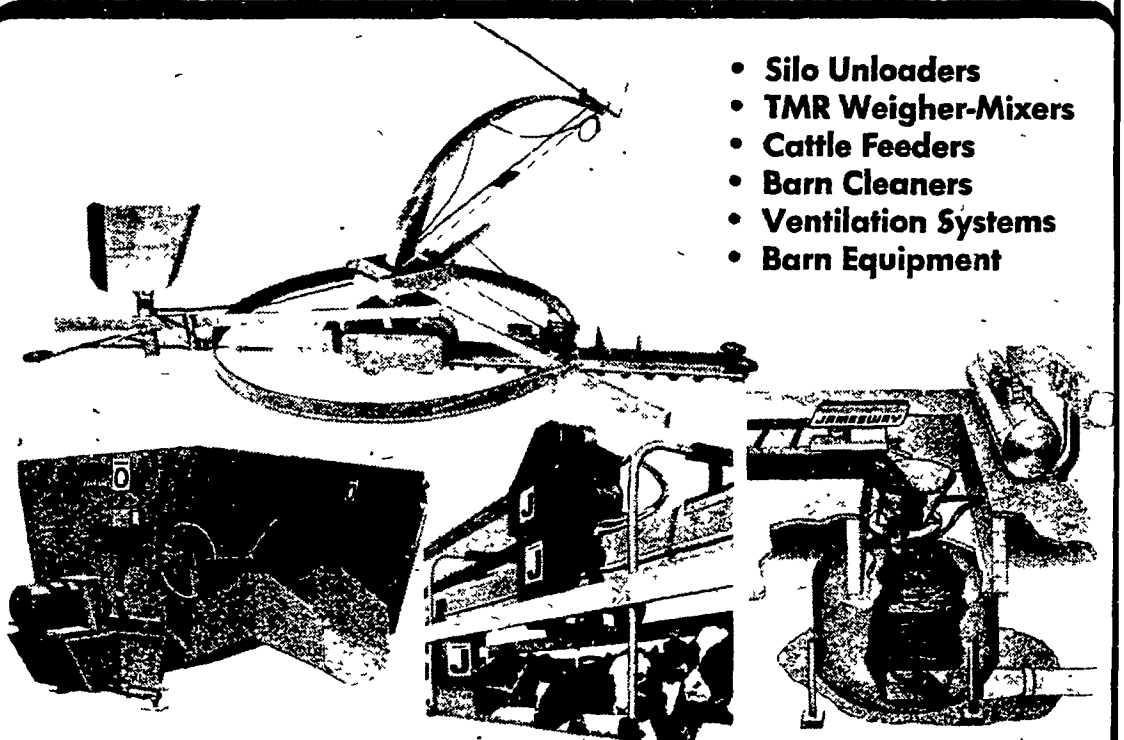
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