

# Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

## Delmarva farm country growing bigger

Delmarva farm country is getting bigger.

That may sound different from what people have been led to believe for so many years. Sure I know farmland is being gobbled up for housing, highways, parking lots, and some other uses. A sizable chunk is gone and will never return to farming.

But while this has been happening, many farmers have been finding ways to make their farms bigger. A combination of land prices and other factors have encouraged them to bring new land into production — acres that grew only trees or marshgrass or pasture.

So today, any tour through the lower Delmarva peninsula will reveal more land clearing and draining activity than highway and shopping center building. And while I don't have figures on this exchange, I'm sure there will be more total acres farmed this year than last.

The trend really picked up steam about 1973 when farm incomes

improved dramatically and when the secretary of agriculture called on farmers to plant their ground right up to the fence rows.

The fact is there's lots of land on the peninsula that isn't that busy. Land covered with scrub timber costs a lot to get into production — more than it was worth until recent years. But as farmers searched for ways to expand their farming operations, land clearing for many of them became a better alternative.

Consider the option of buying a neighboring 100 acres already in agricultural production or clearing 100 acres a farmer owns. You can figure \$2,000 an acre minimum to buy land. And it's not always possible to buy land that joins or is even convenient to the home farm.

On the other hand, depending on how it's done, land can be cleared of timber at perhaps one-third that cost. A farmer can often market some timber, then hire someone to come in and clear up what's left, pull the stumps and burn the debris.

No doubt it's cheaper to clear land than it is to buy land. And at the clearing price, it makes economic sense to do it to expand production of soybeans that sell for \$7 or more a bushel.

The impact of that economic situation is simply that a lot of land is still being cleared.

Land drainage likewise has become more worthwhile so the continual problem of tiling and ditching moves ahead as growers reclaim open ground that in the past was too wet to farm. Some of the peninsula's wet ground isn't the very best, but it will produce good crops if it's handled properly and if enough fertilizer is used. And some of it is very good once the drainage problem is solved.

Farms are getting larger in another way — one that doesn't really add acres — as more and more farmers turn to double-cropping. Farmers who were once quite happy with an annual corn crop planted in April and picked in December now want a second crop. So they harvest in September, plant small grain for harvest in late June and follow that with a crop of soybeans. In two crop years they harvest three crops — their 200 acres now equal 300. Some farmers grow even shorter season vegetable crops and get two harvests every year.

Other techniques such as maximum fertilizer use and irrigation double and even triple crop yields. Add all this up and it's easy to see why Delmarva farms are getting bigger.

A 200-acre farm that used to be half woodland yielded only 50 bushels of corn per acre each year. But now, due to land clearing and drainage, all 200 acres are productive. Fertilizer, irrigation and other production technology increase yields and double-cropping adds a whole new dimension.

So, instead of binning 5,000 bushels of corn, that farmer grows twice as many crops on twice as many acres and gets three or four times the yield per acre — 30,000 bushels of corn one year, 15,000 bushels of barley, and 10,000 bushels of soybeans the next. That's 55,000 bushels of grain from

that same farm in two years compared to only 10,000 bushels a few years ago.

Any way you look at it, Delmarva farm country is getting bigger. Consider the world food situation and the pressures that exist for land, it's a comforting realization.

## Subsurface drains need proper maintenance

LEESPORT — If properly maintained, subsurface drains should function well for many years, says Tina Didyong, soil conservation technician of the Soil Conservation Service.

Trouble in drainage systems occurs when soil washes into the drain and blocks the line. Lines can also be blocked by small animals and tree roots.

Most drainage failures can be prevented by regular care and inspection of the drain lines, adds Didyong.

If wet spots or cave-ins are noticed over drain lines, this is an indication that the tile could be broken or dislocated. If water stands in low areas for a few days, the drain is partly or completely blocked.

Surface inlets often become sealed with trash and should be checked regularly. Open inlets require frequent cleaning and trash removal from the protective

grates, where as a filtered inlet requires replacement of clean sand, gravel or rock as areas become clogged with sediment.

To prevent rodents and other small animals from entering and blocking outlets, insert pins horizontally through end of pipe 1½ inches apart or install a flap gate for lines with surface inlets. Periodically check outlet to be sure roots and other debris do not block opening between pins. Replace pins and flap gates when they wear out or are damaged.

The outlet pipe usually empties into an open ditch or channel. Sediment accumulation and vegetation can block the pipe, reduce flow in the drain and cause sediment to accumulate in the line. Periodic ditch cleanouts will maintain free drainage outlets.

For more information on subsurface drains, contact the U.S. Soil Conservation Service.

## Broiler placements

HARRISBURG — Placements of broiler chicks in the Commonwealth during the week ending October 31 were 2,148,000 according to the Pennsylvania Crop Reporting Service.

The placements were seven percent below the corresponding week a year earlier, but four percent above the previous week. Average placements during the past nine weeks were slightly below a year ago.

Placements in the 19 key poultry producing states were 72,406,000, four percent below the previous week but one percent above the same week a year earlier. Average placements during the past nine weeks were four percent above a year ago.

Broiler-fryers slaughtered in Pennsylvania under federal inspection for the week ending October 21 totaled 1,526,000, with an average liveweight of 4.11 pounds.

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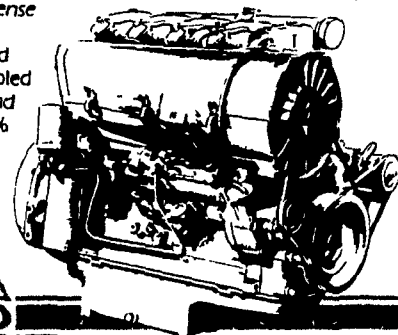
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