

# Buffalo, adverse elements can't dim Alaskan dream

FAIRBANKS, Alaska — Neither marauding buffalo, nor a 30-day crop-spoiling rain nor an August 1 frost weakened the wills of a band of farmers determined to make a go of it north of the 64th latitude in Alaska.

Still, when the harvest was in last summer, the farmers pointed to what they called a "respectable" barley crop on 9,000 newly-cleared acres.

Don Quarberg, agricultural agent for the Cooperative Extension Service, who advises farmers for the county, state and U.S. Department of Agriculture, says these farms are part of 500,000 acres the State of Alaska has designated for cultivation by 1990.

In 1982, the Alaskans say, they'll put more land to work. Of the 60,000 acres they've cleared thus far, they expect to farm about 11,000 acres next summer. They've grown grain near Delta Junction, about 100 miles southeast of Fairbanks, for two seasons.

Quarberg says the Alaskan farmers have sound reasons for believing their endeavor — called the Delta Project — is doing okay. He claims the grain yields produced during Alaska's short but intense growing season have exceeded the expectations of the most ardent optimists.

Barley fields, he said, have recorded yields of better than 70 bushels per acre, although buffalo, rain and frost brought last year's yield on some farms down to 35 bushels per acre.

Many farmers like barley as a crop because it is an excellent livestock feed, and a growing number of farmers in the project are acquiring livestock, says Quarberg. Four of the farmers now have been cattle herds ranging from 30 to 200 brood sows; one has 17 dairy cows; another has 60; a third is building a dairy herd.

Still another farmer is launching a hog-raising operation with 70 sows and plans to increase this number to 150 in another year.

Next spring, the state plans to offer additional acreage in an expansion to be known as Delta II. Soil surveys are under way to determine which lands will be put on the block for Delta III.

The project was begun in August 1978 when state land east of Delta Junction and north of the Alaska highway was divided into 22 tracts

and sold by lottery, with the stipulation that the land be used only for agriculture. The tracts averaged 2,700 acres — larger than most Kansas and Nebraska wheat farms.

Here, modern-day pioneers planted crops on land that had never been farmed. They dealt with conditions that might have tried even the persistence and adaptability of their great-grandparents moving west in the mid-1800's.

However, this group has helped their ancestors never dreamed of.

That help comes from scientists with the USDA's Agricultural Research Service who work with state and university researchers in a continuing program aimed at meeting the needs of Alaskan agriculture.

These scientists tailor their research to develop means of meeting the special needs of Alaska's soil, climate and short growing season. They also take into account the need for genetically adapted crop varieties, marketing expertise and other factors peculiar to Alaskan farming.

In one research project, two promising varieties of six-row barley were introduced from Finland in 1978 and 1979. Both produced yields exceeding 100 bushels per acre in trials near Delta Junction.

One variety, Hankifa's Eero, is a dwarf type patterned after Green Revolution wheats and averages 16 to 23 inches tall. The other variety, Paavo, averages 31 inches high, 5 to 7 inches shorter than most varieties grown by Alaskan farmers.

Both varieties are early maturing and appear well adapted to conditions in interior Alaska.

Delta Junction farmers found, however, that even the new strain of barley planted in some of their tracts wasn't ready for the heavy rain that pelted the Delta area for 30 days during August and September last year, leaving a disappointing harvest for some.

For others, a herd of some 300 marauding buffalo destroyed more than 900 acres of grain just before harvest. Early frost on Aug. 1 damaged green barley kernels, adding to the list of farm casualties.

Yet, these farmers cling to their optimism, along with extension workers and USDA researchers who share their dream. They believe, said Quarberg, that the buffalo problem will be solved and that they will find ways to deal with whatever happens.

Like the pioneers of the "old" West, these Alaskans suffer from the isolation. Neighbors rarely live close by. Many families have no electric power lines. No telephones. It gets lonesome.

"But these are minor concerns," said Quarberg.

"These people have made a big investment in Alaska's future and they're making it work."

Alaskans believe they can avoid making many of the soil-wasting errors their ancestors made in the "lower 48" states in the past century. They cultivate their fields of barley between rows of moss and pieces of spruce trees left over when the land is cleared.

Called "berms," the ground cover between crop rows are burned in the fall and winter.

Alaskans worry about winds carrying the rich, top layer of soil away from the land, so they create windbreaks. They do this when they clear the land by leaving rows of trees standing every one-fourth of a mile.

Weeds, a major headache in the "lower 48" states, aren't much of a bother in Alaska. Few weeds grow on this newly-cleared land. Minor annual weeds do plague some older, developed Alaskan farmland, but proper cultural practices bring most of these under control. Few chemicals are needed.

Wild plants and animals are protected in wildlife preserves within the Delta expansion project. A greenbelt along the river in Delta West has been set aside to insure that the salmon spawning grounds will not be affected by siltation or human encroachment.

On Delta East, headwaters of Clearwater Creek are protected in the same manner, along with an historic peregrine falcon nesting ground.

Agriculture storage facilities and a transportation system to haul farm products to market are critically needed, say the farmers. They especially need facilities to transfer grain from trucks to railroad cars at North Pole, a small town south of Fairbanks, and then from the railroad cars to ships at the Port of Seward.

The farmers say a ready market awaits their grain in the Pacific rim countries.

A shipping terminal is planned for Seward, and there is talk of a grain terminal in Valdez, the coastal town where oil from Alaska's pipeline is put aboard ships to enter world commerce. The Alaska Farmers Cooperative has expanded its grain storage facility by 6,000 tons to 13,000 tons, and a transportation network to service the farmed tracts is on the drawing board.

Doubt the future of farming in this cold land and the Alaskans will tell you:

"Come back and take another look in 10 years!"

## U.S. benefits from Polish research

WASHINGTON, D.C. — A team of U.S. Department of Agriculture forestry experts have reported current Polish-U.S. remote sensing research could bring benefits in the forests of both countries, according to Joan Wallace, director of USDA's Office of International Cooperation and Development.

Wallace said the team, back from a two-week scientific exchange trip to Poland, reported that country is using remote sensing to measure pest populations, do aerial photography and apply biological measures to control pests. Other areas of interest to both countries include remote sensing sampling and interpretation of air pollution damage to forests, monitoring water pollution, and using forest inventory data bases to test new monitoring, mapping and sampling techniques, she said.

The forestry team also said Poland could benefit from some of

the more sophisticated remote sensing techniques being developed in the United States for land use classification and mapping, and other applications, such as monitoring strip mining rehabilitation sites, the inventory of forest resources and area sampling techniques.

Members of the U.S. forestry team included: Raymond Allison and Frederick Honing of the USDA Forest Service, Washington, D.C., and Gyde Lund, stationed with the Forest Service at Fort Collins, Colo.

Wallace said a four-member Polish team of cartographers and remote sensing experts visited the United States last September to observe U.S. applications of aerial photography and Landsat satellite

data by USDA agencies. Continuing scientific exchanges involving agriculture, as well as forestry, are planned with Poland, Wallace said.

Forests cover 28 percent of the total land area in Poland. Some 80 percent of the trees are coniferous, including large stands of pine and spruce. Poland has 21 national species of trees and 20 imported varieties.

It is generally believed in Poland that problems with insect pests there have increased because of a system of monoculture, or the commercial growth of one kind of tree. U.S. team members said Polish scientists feel the need to promote silviculture methods which develop more natural stands of forests.

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