



Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Weather deals bad hand

John Ostradka is not one of those high-rollers you read about in the national farm magazines. He's not one of the young tigers that is probably going to dominate agriculture over the next few

decades. He's just what some folks describe as a typical Illinois farmer. Eight hundred acres of flat, southern Illinois cropland devoted to corn, soybeans and small grain.

When I visited with him a few

weeks ago, he had \$18,000 worth of soybeans still in the field and the ground was too muddy to operate a combine — a heavy snow before the ground freezes and those beans are lost.

It was one of those years for John, one of many for a man who's farmed that kind of ground all his life. He takes the possibility of such a monumental loss with the same dignity that he accepts the profits from his 50 bushel per acre beans already in the bin.

It was the day before Thanksgiving and we were looking over his brand new combine, tucked safely out of the weather while he waited for the land to dry. For months John has been waiting for the land to dry.

"It started last summer and it's just never let up," he told me. "That field was ready for soybean seeding and it started to rain." By the time it dried out enough to plant, John had to go in and plow again, and it rained ever since — all summer and fall.

That one field, the one that was

too wet to combine, represented a substantial loss if the snows came before the ground froze. There was just no way John was going to get into that field without a heavy freeze.

All through the wet fall harvest he slopped around in mud up to his knees, doing what he could to get several hundred acres of corn and soybeans into the bin before really bad weather came along.

He was doing pretty good in the beginning, until his five-year-old combine decided to give up with a blown diesel engine. It was time to trade anyway, so he went to the very best. A \$118,000 machine, not including the corn harvesting attachment, that has just about everything you could want, including 4-wheel drive.

But even that didn't solve the problem. It was just too wet, and that big machine wallowed and stuck and was pulled out time after time as John attempted to work his way through the harvest.

It hasn't been a typical season, but it's not that unusual in that part of southern Illinois. The topsoil is not very deep and a subsoil hardpan prevents adequate drainage. Driving down those rutted country roads, you could see field after field where combines had literally been dragged down the rows in an effort to complete the harvest. Ruts so deep they looked like irrigation channels were everywhere, and the obvious mudholes where combines had been stuck and pulled out with wreckers, 4-wheel drive tractors and anything else available abounded.

Some farmers were even equipping their combines with rice tires — special wide tires with

extra heavy cleats used on combines in the southern rice states. And even they were failing.

In fact, the only combines that were having any success at all in those quagmires were the relatively small, lightweight self-propelled machines that could skim over the surface without breaking through. And there just aren't enough of them around anymore to get the job done.

So John watched the heavily overcast sky and hoped for a cold snap. If the ground would freeze, he could finish in a couple of days. But if a heavy snow comes first, forget it. The beans shatter and lodge and are impossible to harvest.

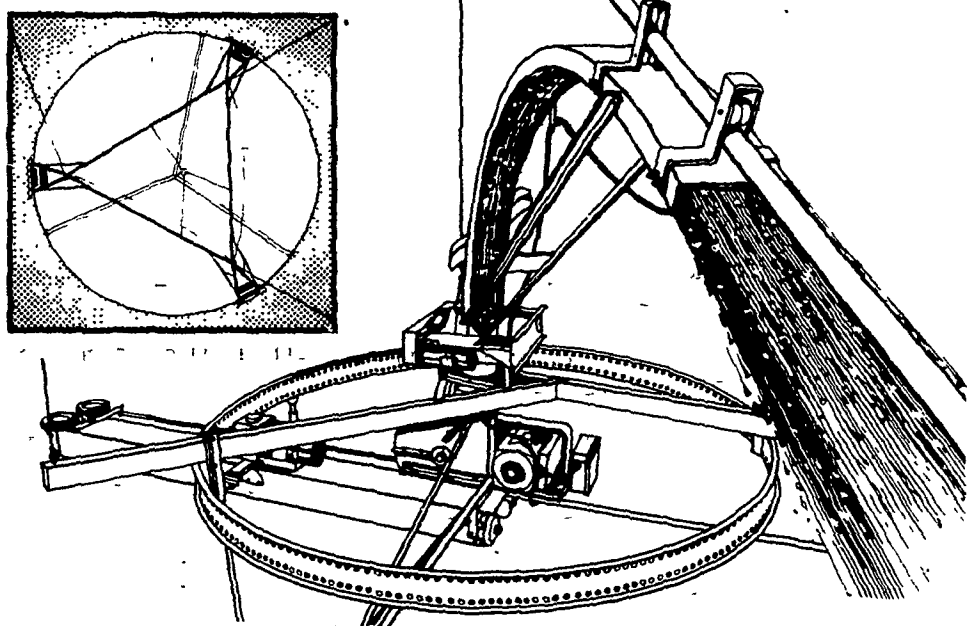
Such are the dilemmas of agriculture. John Ostradka had so much rain he could hardly plant his soybeans and then he couldn't harvest them. Here on the Delmarva peninsula many farmers didn't get enough rain to even make a crop. John has acres he couldn't harvest; Delmarva farmers had acres with nothing to harvest. And it's all because of the weather.

John Ostradka is the kind of farmer that a lot of other farmers could admire. He's successful, has a good operation, knows how to grow crops and makes money. He owns good farm machinery, has a neat farmstead and an almost new house — all of the outward trappings of agricultural success.

But it hasn't always been that way and it hasn't come easy. John used to farm across the road, where he milked cows for years. But open-heart surgery and an

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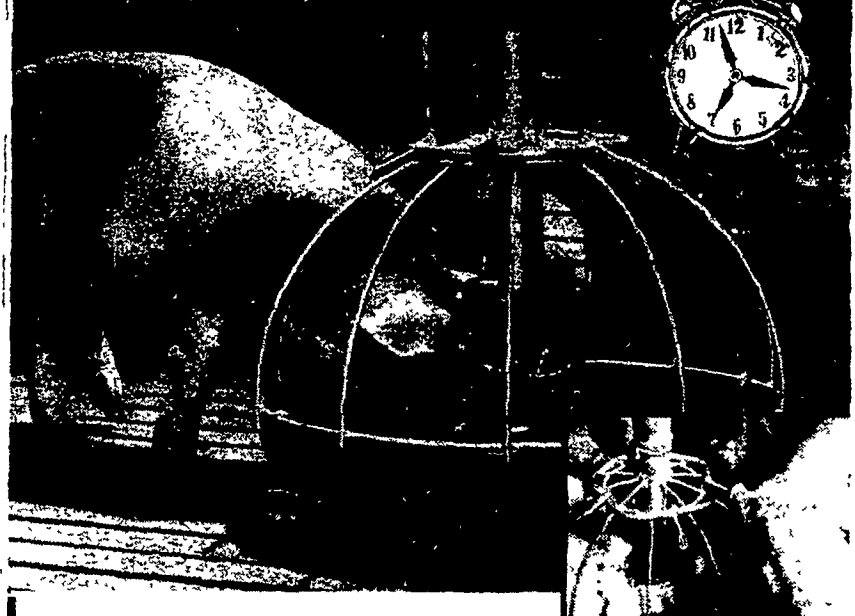
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