

McDonnell dairy earns conservation honors

NORRISTOWN — With increasing amounts of conservation work being done on farms in Montgomery County, the Montgomery County Conservation District had a tough job selecting this year's Outstanding Conservation Farmer.

Twelve candidates were in the running as they each completed large amounts of conservation work on their farms to control soil erosion. After numerous discussions and balloting, the McDonnell Dairy Farm was

selected as the winner of this year's award.

The farm is a family run business which includes a retail dairy store operation. The McDonnell brothers, Frank, John, and William farm several hundred acres in the East Greenville Pennsburg area. Since at least 1975, they have been active in the conservation field. McDonnell's were one of the first in the county to install a detailed animal waste facility involving separation of solids and liquids.

When they purchased their present farm, two large four to five foot deep gullies existed which eroded sediment directly into the

Macoby Creek. Today, these gullied areas no longer exist as two large grassed waterways have taken their place. Numerous other

conservation practices such as stripcropping, conservation tillage, and storage terraces to mention a few have been installed over the years.

Farm Talk

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Breakthroughs in agricultural research for the most part aren't dramatic. They're little successes that add to other little successes that eventually improve a process. A new soybean variety doesn't revolutionize agriculture, but it does make it more productive. A new tillage technique such as no-till doesn't increase yields, but it does reduce fuel consumption. And the seemingly pointless basic research that means little or nothing to everyone but the researcher, when carried to its conclusion adds one more block to a foundation that eventually becomes a breakthrough.

And not all that needs to be known about agriculture is known by any means. Look around at the way our food is produced now compared to 50 years ago and then try to think ahead 50 years. It will take a few breakthroughs and some gradual progress to keep us adequately fed. And that says nothing about the pressures coming from the environmentalists, the land developers and others who have impact on farm productivity.

That's why the researchers keep looking and once in a while they find something. Here's an example. A researcher in Michigan thinks he has some plants that are toxic to other plants. By proper selection and management, he believes these plant killers could take over some of the work of weed control chemicals. In fact, this Michigan State horticulturist, Al Putnam, is doing field trials with cover crops that he thinks will help control weeds in subsequent economic crops.

So far he's singled out two varieties of sorghum and one of sudan grass that seem to have this yet unidentified natural weed killer. He's found that by planting these cover crops and then killing them with chemicals or allowing them to winterkill and then planting other crops in the residue, he's able to get as high as 95 percent effective weed control with certain weeds. And he feels that within a few years enough will be known so that this natural herbicide can be used commercially.

To give you some idea of the time frame of agricultural research, Putnam's work goes back more than half a century to earlier work done by crop scientists in the area of "soil sickness." At that time, researchers became aware that certain plants had toxic effects on certain other plants, and that somehow this poison seemed to be transmitted through the soil.

Building on these discoveries, the horticulturist was able to identify some of these toxic crops. He then set about finding what plants were compatible with them and what plants were not. Out of this came the production pattern of planting toxic plants as cover crops.

Putnam believes that more research is required to find out exactly what weeds are being controlled and how to improve the accuracy of the dosage. So far his natural weed killers' effectiveness

ranges between 65 and 95 percent. He also thinks it's unlikely that researchers will ever find one natural herbicide that will control the broad spectrum of weeds that trouble farmers. Therefore, he thinks they will be just part of an arsenal of weed control weapons. That includes everything from crop rotation to changing chemicals to the use of natural weed killers.

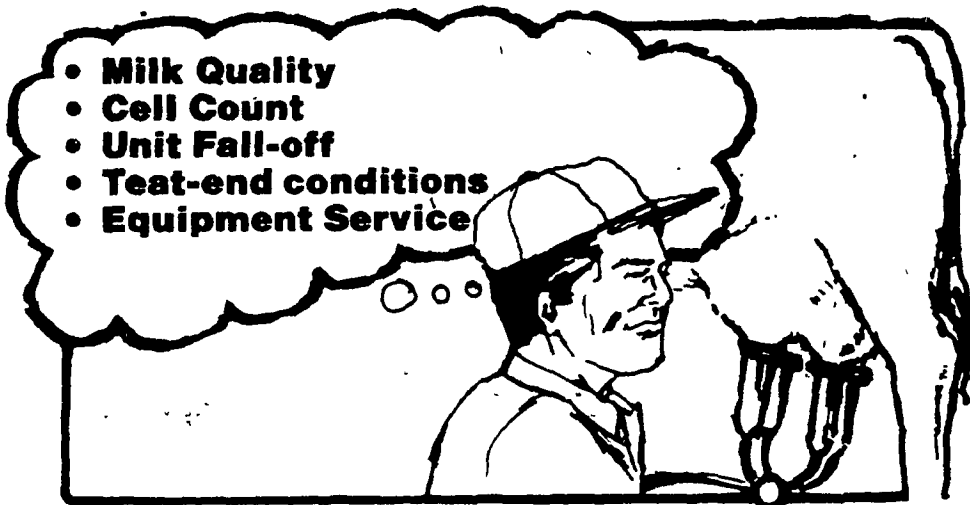
That's just one example of agricultural research that's in progress right now. Maybe to some it seems silly, maybe even a waste of money. But when you look at the potential, the millions of dollars that it could save and the environmental concern it could solve, its impact is far-reaching. Maybe it's not as dramatic as hybrid corn, but it certainly has the economic potential.



Duane Clarke, left, Chairman of the Montgomery County Conservation District presents their Outstanding Conservation Farmer Award for 1982 to John, center, the William McDonnell, right, accepting for McDonnell Dairy Farm.

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