

Cawley urges 'buffer strip' caution

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — Maryland Secretary of Agriculture, Wayne A. Cawley, Jr., says the question of farmers quickly converting portions of their cropland into "buffers" or "filter strips" is not as easily done as some would make it sound.

"The purpose of a buffer area is to filter sediment from storm water runoff to prevent its entry into streams, rivers, or the Chesapeake Bay. In order for a filter strip to operate as intended, it must be on a fairly flat, uniform grade and be vegetated with a dense, erosion-resistant variety of grass. Shade from trees and other obstructions will interfere with the growth of the filter vegetation.

"Many persons, both in and out of government in Maryland, have made a number of statements recently urging that farmers install the strips in an effort to aid in reducing pollution of waterways and the Chesapeake Bay," Secretary Cawley says.

"The public may get the impression that buffers are a quick and inexpensive way to provide a noticeable improvement to water quality in the bay.

"Buffers are only one of many 'Best Management Practices' (BMPs) which should be used after a field inspection by conservation experts to determine that site conditions would warrant it. We support the approach of the soil conservation districts and the U.S. Soil Conservation Service to prepare and implement a comprehensive conservation plan for

the entire farm.

"Buffers or filter strips are effective ways to trap sediment and nutrients but they must be designed and installed precisely if they are to work properly. Simply reserving an area in natural vegetation may not, in many instances, be effective in providing a filter."

"There are a number of technical things that have to be considered to make a buffer, or filter strip, work properly.

"Materials planted in the strips have to meet certain standards if they are to work properly, the area to be planted must be prepared properly, amended with lime and fertilizer based on soil test data if the strips are to work. Keep the flow of runoff in a filter strip uniform and slow enough to allow infiltration and sediment and nutrient removal may even require grading of the site.

"There may be need for temporary mulching of the seeded area to help get it off to a good start and the strips must be maintained on a regular basis by cutting so that the grasses they are planted to don't clump. Clumping affects the filtering ability of the strip.

"Buffer or filter strips aren't the answer to runoff in many instances. They aren't very effective if the terrain of the ground involved has a slope of more than five percent and such strips are only effective when runoff flows slowly and uniformly in a manner known as 'sheet flow'. Direct flow of water from fields may require

other measures such as grading, spreaders and dissipators to be employed in conjunction with the strips to change a concentrated or channel flow of runoff to sheet flow before it enters the filter area.

"Anyone seriously considering buffer or filter strips should be aware of the fact that the U.S. Soil Conservation Service (SCS), for many years, has included them as a 'Best Management Practice' (BMP) and has worked out a full set of standards and specifications for them.

"By idling land under the USDA Payment-in-Kind (PIK) or other USDA programs, farmers can provide temporary buffers on their own by simply planting last year's shoreline cropland in a vegetative cover that will reduce erosion. When the PIK program is over, much of that land will revert back to cropland; buffers provided in the interim would not be eligible for cost sharing but the cost of installing it would only cover the planting of seed, which is a PIK requirement anyway.

"These temporary buffers should not be confused with the permanent filter strips.

"Agriculture is responding to its duty to assist in reducing and eliminating, whenever possible, runoff of sediment, chemicals and nutrients into our waterways. Our new state cost-share program will provide an added incentive to farmers to participate in installing soil and water conservation practices, one of which is filter strips.

"I have gone on record recently with the Secretary of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Dr. Torrey C. Brown, in supporting his suggestion that buffers be required on the vast acreage of farmlands owned by the State of Maryland which is rented out to tenant farmers.

"I suggested to him that such practices on state-owned lands be measured so as to be a living experiment this year to precisely measure their effects at filtering runoff. Cost and effectiveness results could be determined before serious thought be given to ex-

panding by regulation, or other governmental action, the buffer plan to private lands.

"Before government begins demanding private landowners take action it should first carry out such practices itself on the land it owns and measure the costs of the demands.

"In the meantime, a voluntary approach by agriculture is the best way in my view and one that is now going to be handsomely assisted by the new conservation cost-share program being implemented this year by MDA", Mr. Cawley concluded.

No till corn increases

CHAMBERSBURG — About 30,000 acres of corn being planted this spring in Franklin County will be done by the no-till planting system, states John R. Akers, District Conservationist with the Chambersburg office of the USDA Soil Conservation Service.

This leaves another 58,000 acres of corn land that will still be done after plowing, chisel plowing, or planting with a no-till planter on bare fields without a residue or cover crop.

Many county farmers are missing out on the maximum benefits of no-till planting when they just plant in a bare field, Akers said. When corn planting is done in a crop residue or cover crop, moisture is held on the soil and there is a buildup of organic matter plus soil erosion losses are reduced, he added.

When time is at a premium and fuel costs are rising again, no-till planting offers a good alternative to the traditional plowing and tilling of the soil before planting. Better management is needed to control weeds and insects in the no-till planting systems.

Yields are averaging out as high with no-till corn as compared with conventional planted corn, states Akers. When the residues are left on the fields, the soil losses can be reduced from 10 or more tons per acre to less than 5 tons per acre. This results in dollar savings to the farmer with reduced losses of lime, fertilizer, and pesticides when erosion losses are minimized.

For more information on no-till planting systems, contact the USDA Soil Conservation Service office at 550 Cleveland Avenue, Chambersburg or call 264-7013.

Did You Read the May 10th Issue of Hoard's Dairyman, page 620?

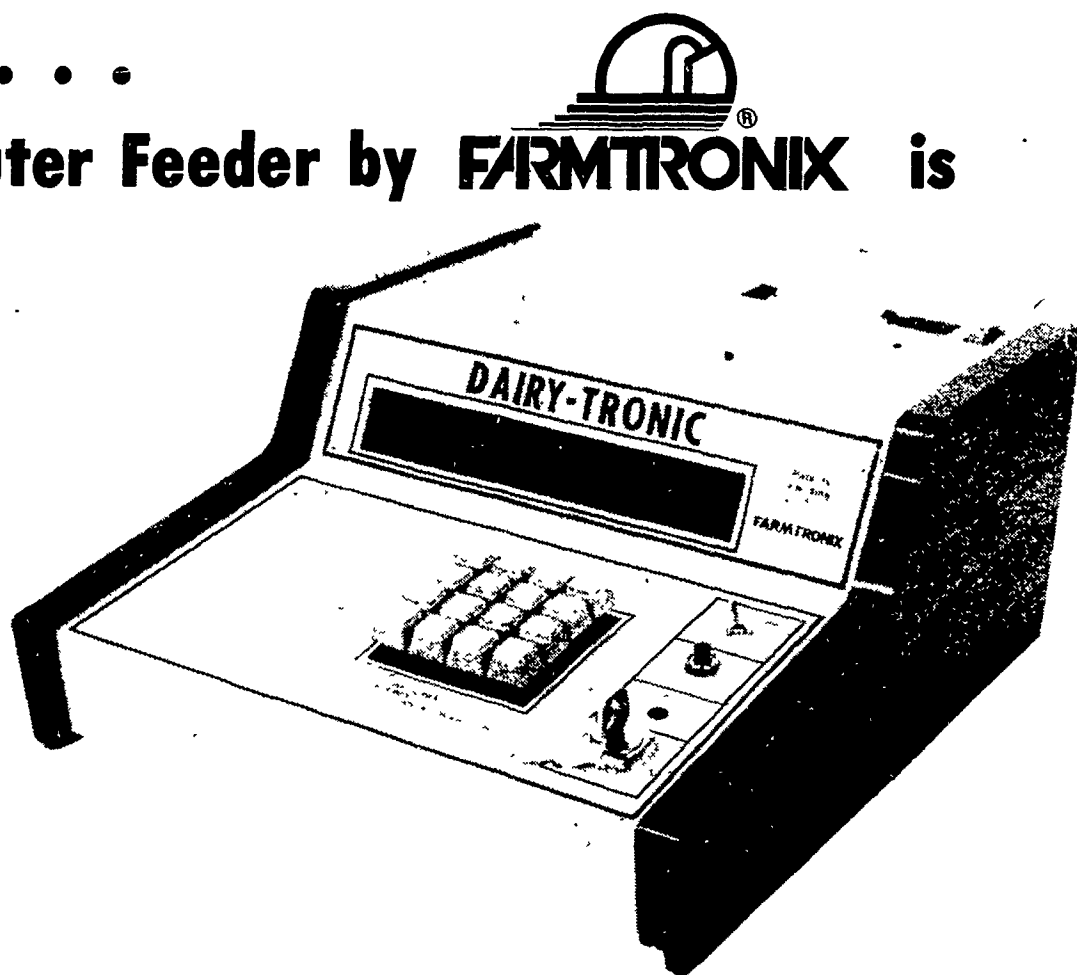
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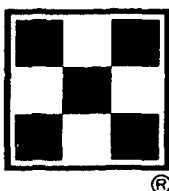
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