

Farm Talk

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as level as a table and the soil as deep as you can imagine. And the farmsteads all looked good — buildings painted, grass clipped, machinery well cared for and a general appearance of prosperity. And then the land would start to

get lighter. That's when I started to see more hard times, more farmsteads in need of paint, more rundown machinery, more old pickup trucks, and a general sign of impending failure.

Then on to Wisconsin — the great dairy state with its red barns and

milk cows I had been to Wisconsin before — almost 25 years ago — and I was equally impressed this time by the quantity of red barns. Why Wisconsin farmers paint their barns red and Illinois farmers paint theirs white is a mystery to me. Maybe it has to do with an ethnic background, or perhaps just a real good red paint salesman, but it is truly an agricultural phenomena.

There's little doubt that farm commodity production is regionalized to a large extent. If the Delmarva peninsula stopped growing corn and soybeans, Wisconsin would produce more. If we stopped growing chickens, I don't know what would happen.

But what does this mean to Delmarva farmers? I suppose it

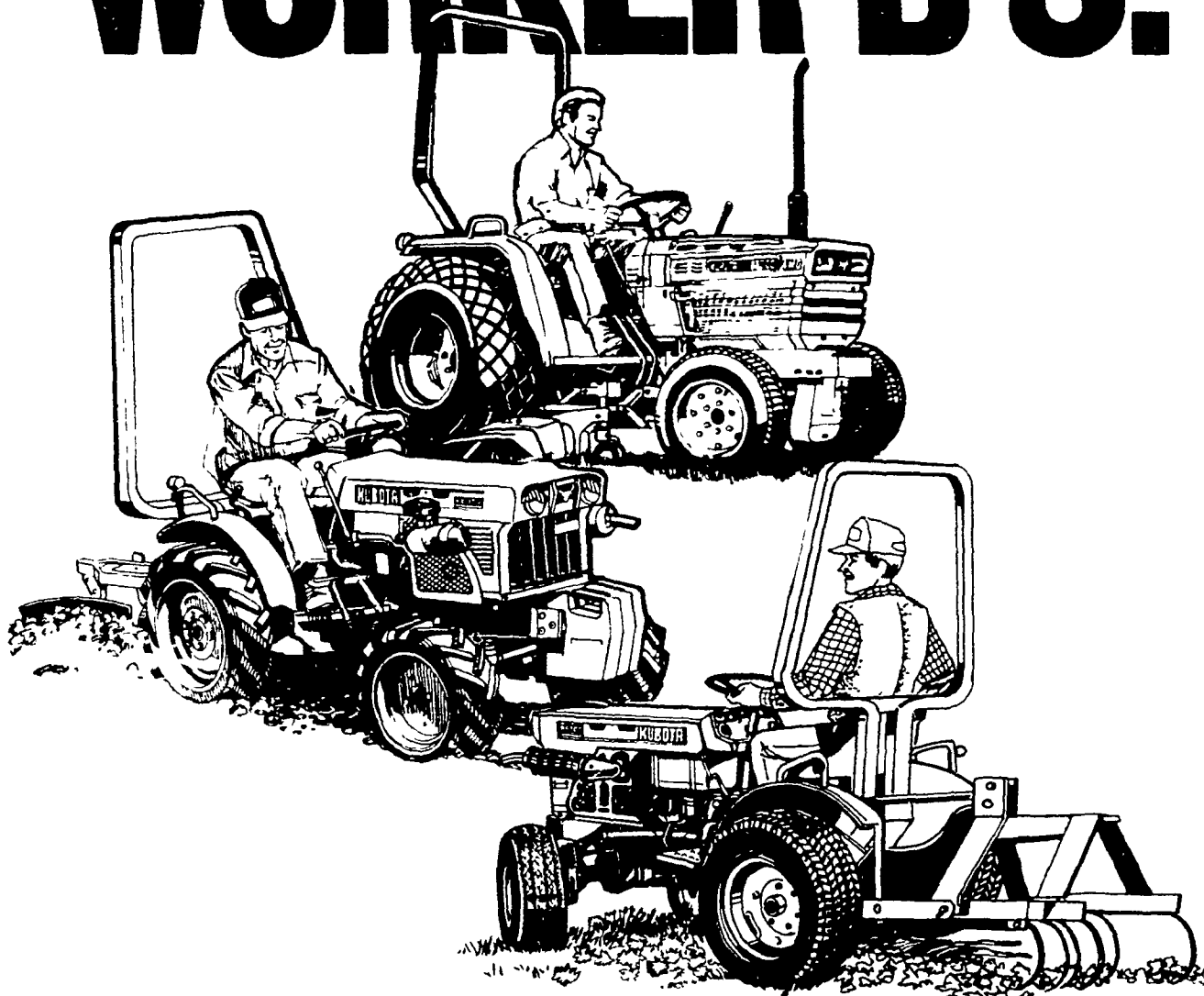
means there is an awful lot of agriculture out there that we must compete against and participate in. And while the peninsula is not a vast agricultural area, it is a significant one. But if Delmarva farmers are going to continue to farm they're going to have to compete in the marketplace with those big Midwestern farmers. And they're going to have to maintain an environment free from the urban pressures that might prevent this.

In some of the communities where I traveled farming was the only business. The biggest store in town was the John Deere dealer and the biggest employer was a nearby farmer. You can bet those kinds of communities aren't going to shackle agricultural production with unnecessary harassment over water quality, wind erosion, and agricultural odors.

All in all it was an interesting experience. It provided a view of American agriculture that's hard to get any other way. I returned confident in the farm system's ability to feed American people and a continuing concern about its ability to overproduce.

Would I do it again? Well not any time soon. I've seen American agriculture from the seat of a motorcycle. I returned unharmed and a little rump-weary. It was an agricultural adventure that doesn't have to be repeated.

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