

# It's a bleak outlook for Del. farmers

BY DORIS CROWLEY

NEWARK, Del. — Reeling from the fourth economically disastrous year in a row, many Delaware farmers are wondering how much longer they can stay in business. Agricultural officials are still trying to decide how best to help producers who were affected by this summer's drought—a decision made difficult by the fact that it had very uneven effects in Delaware.

Corn yields in the western half of Kent and New Castle counties and much of Sussex County have been drastically reduced, though nobody will know by exactly how much until after harvest. Even loamy land that usually produces well in dry seasons is so parched it's likely to produce half what it usually does. On sandier soil, some corn isn't worth picking. Soybean losses are harder to estimate, though that crop also has been affected. Plants in some very dry fields are prematurely dropping their leaves. In Sussex County, some drought-stressed plantings also suffered from severe podworm infestations.

"It looks as though we're going to have some pretty substantial corn yield reductions," New Castle County extension agent Dean Belt told me recently. "This has been the worst drought I remember in this county. Along the river, some

farms look good. But in the rest of the county land that usually does well even in dry weather has been hard hit. Many fields that normally yield 150 bushels an acre without irrigation are going to get only around 50 this year." One grower told Belt he counted 45 stalks in a row without an ear of corn. After that, the man quit counting.

Compounding the effects of the drought is the fact that much of Delaware's corn crop was at least two weeks later than normal going into the ground last spring, Belt said. And some farmers who planted before the ground was ready wish they hadn't because the corn didn't come up well at all. As a result, stands were extremely uneven, with wide ranges in height among plants even in the same row.

Kent County ag agent Bob Hochmuth had a similar story to tell when I spoke with him. "You can almost split the county in half this summer," he said. "In the northeast—especially along the Delaware River—the corn crop looks very good and farmers will probably have minimal losses. Below the Dover air base and on the west side of the county, I'd estimate yields will be down at least 30 percent." Fortunately, soybeans all over his county appear to have done better, thanks to some timely late August rains,

though those arrived too late for most of the corn crop.

Hochmuth said vegetables suffered both because of the late, wet spring, and the hot weather which followed. Even with irrigation, the heat took a heavy toll—affecting blossom set on lima beans and pollination of sweet corn. Potato yields were also hurt—down about 30 percent from 1982 because of conditions during tuber set. Strong prices at harvest helped to offset potato losses but other produce crops suffered from both the weather and depressed prices.

In Sussex County the picture's

much the same, said extension agent Derby Walker. Spotty rains benefited some fields but left others unharvestable. Searing temperatures affected not only corn pollination, but fruit and pod set on everything from watermelons and peppers to soybeans. On top of all this, a severe outbreak of spider mites damaged many crops, and many soybean and lima plantings were seriously hurt by a late season podworm attack. Ironically, the spring pea crop—usually counted on as an early cash crop to help cover costs of main season crop production—was poor in some places because to too much water.

"Overall, the corn crop in Sussex County's pretty much a disaster from a yield standpoint," said University of Delaware extension crops specialist Frank Webb. "With \$4 corn, the people with 50 to 60 bushel yields should at least cover out-of-pocket costs." Walker agreed, noting that this won't cover things like taxes, machinery wear, labor and other fixed costs. And of course the best prices in the world won't help the farmer with no corn to pick.

The agent said farmers with irrigation were up night after night keeping their systems going, to the point of total exhaustion. With the heat, the lack of rain, and worry

over crops, many growers were under considerable physical and emotional stress. "I think this drought is worse than the one in 1977 because of the money up front," Walker said. "Some guys are barely hanging in."

As serious as the season's weather losses are, observers agree they're only a contributing factor to a far more serious problem facing Delaware farmers.

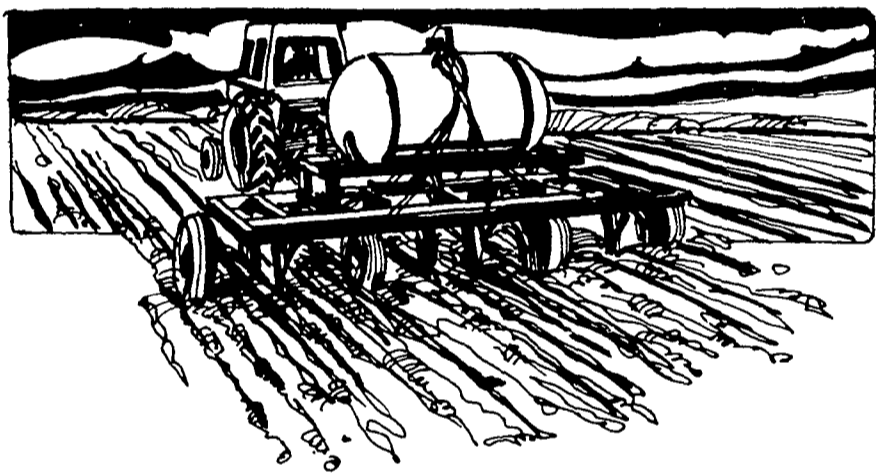
"The plight farmers find themselves in today is really a four-year-old problem," Belt said. "First we had a year of drought (in 1980). Then we had a couple of good production years with very depressed prices, and now we've got another drought."

"No matter what happens to the crop after it's in the ground," he said, "you're got to put on the fertilizer, herbicides and plant the seed. With inflation, farmers have been forced to borrow money just to produce. And most of them—even the good managers—aren't getting back enough to live on. They're living off depreciation and equity, and that can't go on."

University of Delaware extension farm management specialist Don Tilmon believes that what's really got farmers up against a wall is variable interest rates. "Over the past eight years these rates have varied as much as 50 percent within a given year," he said. "During this period farmers have borrowed money to expand and/or buy new equipment. It's the interest payments on these loans that are killing them now." That, plus the cycle of poor yields and poor prices.

Tilmon said it's hard to

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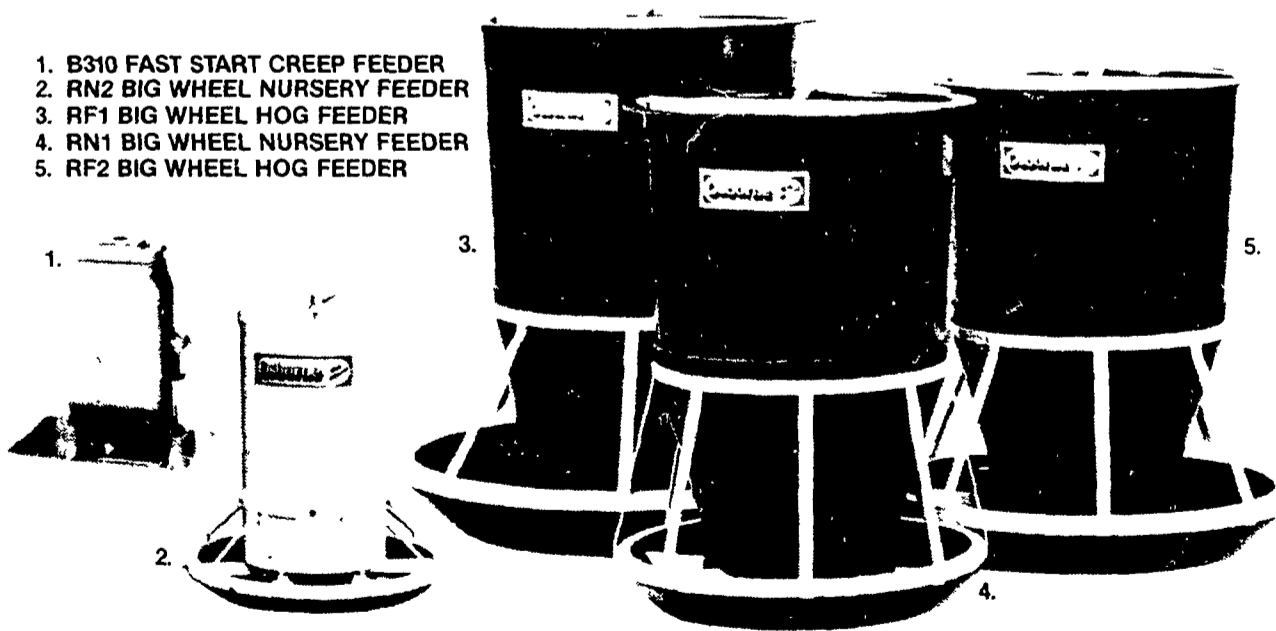
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