



Farm Talk

by
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The recent dip in U.S. farmland prices is causing some renewed interest by foreigners in buying U.S. farmland. Not that there is any great rush. There never has been and the easing of land prices although undoubtedly temporary won't make rural America a Mecca for foreign investors.

The most recent data I've seen still indicates that foreigners own less than one percent of our total land area. But in some places notably the south, the concentration is much higher. Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas account for about one-third of all foreign owned acreages. And in some counties in those states the foreign influence is quite noticeable.

How do the neighbors feel when a foreigner moves in and starts tilling American acres? Progressive Farmer magazine asked some farmers how they felt about foreign neighbors. Some say it's OK.

Others are not so sure. While a lot of foreign owned farmland is held by absentee owners, some are actually living on the land. Pierre Brueder, a Frenchman who owns a farm in Terrell County, Georgia, may be typical of those foreigners squeezed out of their own country by high land prices and lack of opportunity. Brueder says he doesn't like the politics in his country. He thinks a lot more Frenchmen would like to farm in the United States.

Adolph Scherer, a German

citizen, bought a spread in Delta County, Texas, much to the chagrin of his U.S. neighbors. Most would have preferred having the land belong to an American farmer. But over time Scherer has won most of them over by being a good farmer and a good neighbor.

Many of the foreign buyers of U.S. farmland are not unlike some U.S. farmers who have sold out in highly urbanized areas and moved to the boonocks so to speak to get away from the big city pressures. In somewhat the same way, Brueder and Scherer and others like them have done the same thing. They've moved away from a highly restrictive, politically troubled agriculture to the wide open spaces of America where they feel the farming opportunities are better. As a farmer tilling the land in Nebraska or Arkansas or even on the Delmarva peninsula what difference does it make who owns the next farm as long as it's a good neighbor. Who's to say that a displaced farmer from New Castle County, Delaware, would be any better or any worse than one from Germany or France. It really gets down to the people involved rather than the concept. You don't have to go back many generations to find a lot of foreigners tilling American soil. In fact most of America's vast farming acres were first plowed by foreigners. And who's to say Brueder and Scherer and others like them won't become U.S. citizens some day and won't be a valuable part of their rural communities.

Many states restrict foreign ownership of farmland. Some farmers would rule it out altogether. The concept of a wealthy Arab or some kind of European nobility buying up huge tracts of land bothers them. But the strength of the U.S. dollar and the end of the land boom has quieted much of that activity. The experts really don't expect a continuance of the relatively milk foreign involvement of the mid to late '70s. It's more likely to be a few foreign farmers settling here and there around the country as their finances and desires dictate. And given a generation or two, I expect those so-called foreigners will be as American as any of the rest of us.



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