

Farm Talk

by
Jerry Webb

The U.S. Congress is facing a major agricultural challenge — a new farm bill. The law requires that one be written in 1985. Too bad it's so close to a national election because a lot of rhetoric between now and November will just be wasted. No politician is going to get real serious about a new farm bill until at least early 1985.

In the mean time all kinds of farm organizations and others who say they speak for farmers are trying to catch Congress's ear. Some farm organizations have been taking opinion surveys and listening real good to what farmers say so they can reflect their point of view on Capitol Hill. Everyone is hoping that 1985 will be the year of meaningful farm legislation. But don't count on it.

Congress has been struggling with farm bills for decades and hasn't gotten it right yet. We've gone from the very heavy handed mandatory controls of the 1930's to the almost free market of the 1970's and still farm laws keep changing. That's one thing that is for sure — the next farm bill will be different than the old one. Maybe not in significant ways but at least in considerable detail.

The farm problem can be summarized very briefly. It's either too much production, not enough market or a combination of both. The surveys shows that farmers don't blame themselves

for overproduction. Instead, they blame the government and who ever else for lack of market. They blame the grain embargo of the Carter administration for messing up a significant overseas market. They blame the health nuts and other watchdog types for surpluses in tobacco, dairy products, and some other commodities. For the most part their solutions to the current farm problem rest with the marketing function. Not many are interested in cutting production.

That's a strange phenomenon. When you compare agriculture to any other industry you quickly realize that most others would cut production. They would tough out an over supply until the market was cleared up a bit and then they would adjust production downward to meet anticipated demands. But agriculture just doesn't work that way. In times of economic stress farmers tend to produce more attempting to gain income through lower costs per unit and larger volume. And that affect is usually to make the matter worse for everyone.

Of course, the government has tried to help farmers solve this dilemma from time to time with all sorts of elaborate control plans. Most of them ill fated, expensive and unworkable. As soon as the government comes up with a plan that will cut production a farmer figures out how to use it to his

the farmer the more government money he takes in. A program that helps the small farmer financially and cuts production some usually results in a bonanza for the big operator. That's just a fact of life. The larger more efficient producer with more investment and more productivity is going to get more out of any sort of government control program than the small less efficient operator.

The recent PIK program was a classic example of this. It was in fact good for almost all farmers. Even the smallest who participated reaped some benefit. But some truly large farmers were paid millions in government money. To it's credit the PIK program did what it set out to do. It cut production. The problem was it just cost too much to do that. And of course, that's the dilemma that Congress must face when it tries to write that kind of legislation. If there isn't some incentive farmers won't participate. A heavy handed farm bill that sets quotes without some incentive would never get through Congress. A scaled down PIK program with less incentive and lower costs clearly won't get the necessary participation.

So legislators and their advisors are left to struggle with a hopeless situation — a farm bill that will bolster farm incomes without raising food costs. One that will provide a bountiful food supply without risk of over production. A bill that suits farmers and the government as well. Obviously this can't be done. So there will be trade offs, compromises, and pressures of special interest groups and the reality of the overall economy and when the final law is written you can bet that most farmers won't like it any better than they like the current one. Because in reality the farm bill is really a consumer bill. It's aimed at assuring a bountiful food supply with some cost to the taxpayer but not too great a cost.

That's what's happened in some European countries. The farm program is too expensive. Farmers get too much protection at consumer expense. I don't expect that to happen in this country. High tariffs on imported farm commodities aren't consistent with U.S. economic policy and large exporting subsidies are too expensive for most Americans' taste.

So what will the 1985 farm bill say? At this point, no one seems to know except that it won't be revolutionary. It's probably going

to deal with over production in some subtle ways. It will probably tie soil and water conservation practices more closely to program participation and it probably won't cost the taxpayer any more than he or she is already paying. Those are fairly safe assumptions. Beyond that, it's wide open at this point. There is still a lot of talking to do and a national election to conduct and then will come the serious business of debating and writing the 1985 farm bill.

Cornell plans field day

AURORA, N.Y. — Farmers and others in the agricultural and related industries in New York State are invited to a field day scheduled for Sept. 11 at Cornell University's Aurora Research Farm. Attendance is free.

Sponsored by the New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell and Cornell Cooperative Extension, the program focuses on new research developments and production techniques involving a variety of farm crops.

Topics to be discussed during the tour include effects of acid rain and weather on crop management, new techniques for boosting wheat yields, field trials involving numerous corn hybrids, tillage practices, summer seeding of alfalfa, crop rotation comparisons, cover crops as a source of nitrogen, effects of stalk rot and corn borer on corn production, and progress made in Cornell's corn breeding program.

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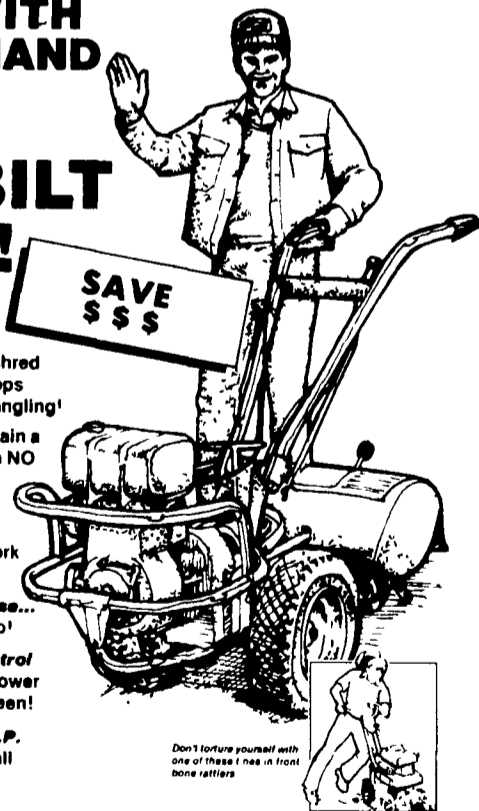
department of agronomy, the 450-acre research farm is located between Poplar Ridge (Route 34 B) and Aurora (Route 90) on the eastern shore of Cayuga Lake, 25 miles north of Ithaca.

Participants will ride hay wagons to visit numerous research and demonstration sites of the research farm. Along the tour route Cornell specialists will describe their research activities and answer questions. Speakers will be from the departments of agronomy, plant pathology, and plant breeding. Each wagon tour will last about three hours.

The day-long event will get under way at 9 a.m. when the first wagon on the tour is scheduled for departure. The last wagon will leave the starting point at 1 p.m. Lunch may be bought at the farm. The outdoor event is expected to attract a large turnout.

For more information about the "Aurora Farm Field Day" on Sept. 11, contact Bill Pardee at (607) 256-2180 or Stu Klausner at (607) 256-2177.

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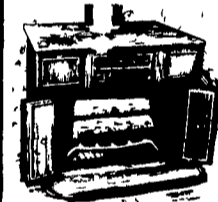
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