

# Commodity supports affect Md. farmers

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — Government commodity plans keep the country's larger farms afloat but also play an important role in Maryland agriculture, according to an agricultural economist at The University of Maryland.

"Most of the information available suggests big farms get the most benefits from commodity price support programs," Dr. Bruce Gardner says. "But I think we can make the argument that such programs make a real difference for small farmers," he says.

To benefit from commodity programs, farmers must plant many acres. On smaller farms, with less defense against loss, such programs can mean the difference between financial success and bankruptcy. Crops without supports are, therefore, forced to confine their operations to levels at which they can stand the risk, Gardner notes.

Although the idea is a novel one,

Gardner says basic observation of the size of the state's fulltime farms, and what they produce, supports the theory.

"Look at the areas where we have no price supports," he says. "There are fewer farms or we see small farms that require large amounts of labor only in certain seasons."

There are exceptions. Gardner says tobacco farms are examples of small-scale commodity producers without price supports in Maryland.

The economist notes Maryland tobacco farmers gave up federal support plans about 10 years ago when they decided to market their own product. They feel they can do as well without the support plans, he says.

Vegetable farms in the state are examples of intense labor operations that Gardner says are also exceptions. Poultry, another Maryland commodity without government support, tends to operate on a larger scale in the

state, he says.

Even without supports, tobacco, poultry and vegetables are financially inviting here, Gardner says. Their small land commitment or close management and high labor needs make them work without government help, he says.

The Maryland economist also says other issues affect state farmers as much or more than commodity pricing plans. He says farmers here seem more concerned with what they can do with their land.

Rising land values in the state make zoning and land use laws more important to Maryland farmers. Gardner says they appear more concerned with how the government says they can use their farmland and pass it on to their children than with price supports.

All these are important to both

small and large operations, Gardner says. He also notes that the ways farmers can use their resources often determines their participation in commodity programs.

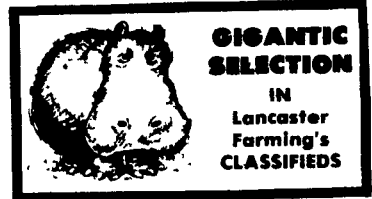
A 1983 report by the council for Agricultural Science and Technology which reviewed economic policy options, suggested several alternatives to increase small farm commodity support programs.

Target prices for grain could be adjusted to different levels for different sized operations, the

report said. Also suggested was the possibility of a direct lump sum payment to all producers if the commodity price falls below a given level.

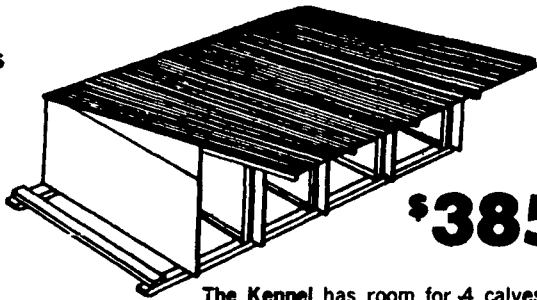
Since Maryland farms are not normally large-scale operations, Gardner says such plans would benefit the state's farmers.

Views on whether commodity programs affect the number and size of farms are not normally supported by studies, Gardner says. However, he believes such effects should be taken into consideration in implementing price support plans.



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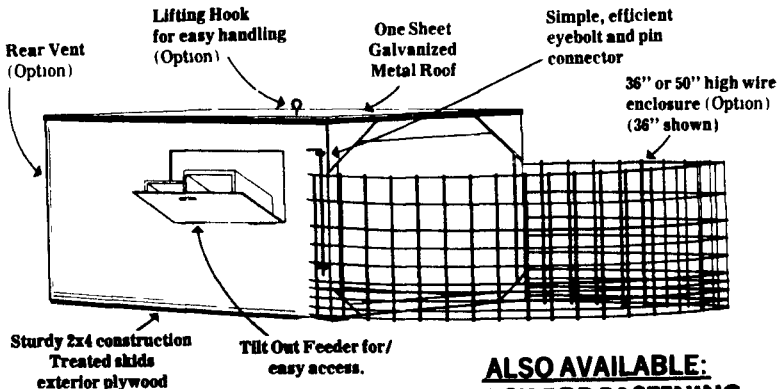
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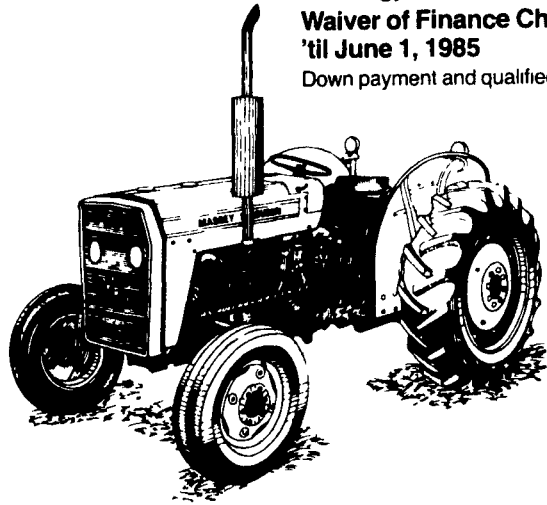
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