Lancaster Farming

VOL. 30 No. 8 | Three Sections | Lancaster Farming, Saturday, December 29, 1984 | $7.50 per Year

Upturn expected in '85 farm picture

Looking back at 1984

BY SUZANNE KEENE

New Year's offers the ideal opportunity to take one last backward glance at the year that will soon be left behind.

1984's weather was kind to farmers. It provided abundant rain intermixed with life-giving sunshine. Together, the two supplied farmers with the kind of growing year they needed following the growth- stunting drought that plagued 1983.

Although a very wet spring delayed planting, corn, wheat and alfalfa grew tall and lush later in the season. The autumn harvest was plentiful, filling empty silos and grain bins that were emptied during the drought.

The year saw the end of the avian influenza that struck poultry flocks across the state. By February, the number of avian flu cases in the state had drastically decreased, much to the poultrymen's relief.

Also in February, Gov. Dick Thornburgh introduced his new budget, which included $500,000 for poultry research and promotion in response to the avian flu. He also signed a bill granting $2 million to

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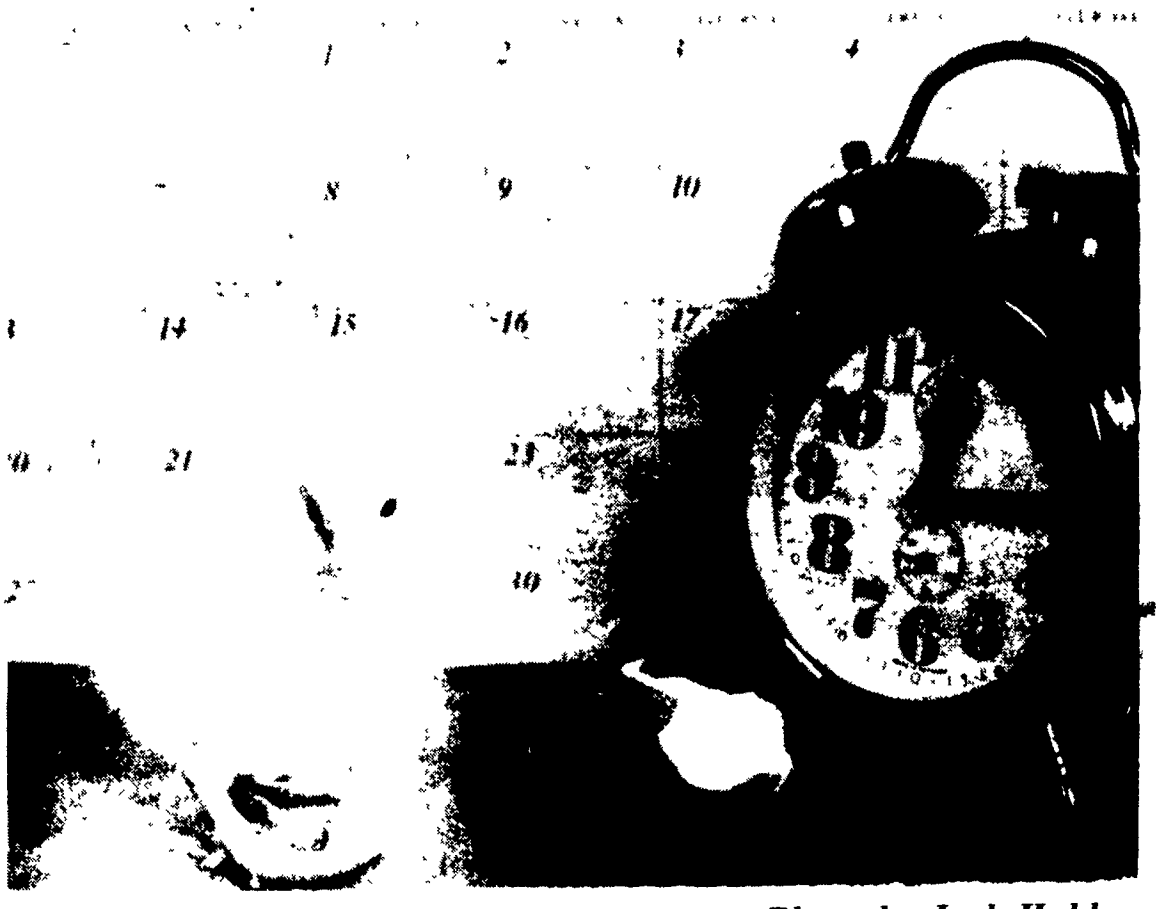

Photo by Jack Hubley

What's ahead for 1985

BY JACK HUBLEY

After a strenuous climb up 1984's agricultural mountain, most farmers are wondering what to expect on the other side. Already on the mountaintop are the experts–the university specialists and extension personnel–glassing into uncharted 1985, and trying to predict what lies ahead. Though the view from the top is often a bit cloudy, our experts tell us that a few trends are clearly visible.

"Agriculture here in the East looks awfully good, compared to the Midwest," says Penn State Extension economist, Louis Moore, who finds agricultural land values to be a good measure of the state of the ag economy. Though Pennsylvania land values increased by three percent in 1983, and have remained stable during 1984, Iowa farmland values slid 20 percent last year, resulting in a total devaluation of 37 percent since 1981

Overall, the economist feels that net farm income may increase somewhat during 1985, with the improvement coming from the livestock sector

But Moore remains cautious about the eastern farm economy as

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Innovations highlight PSU dairy computer conference

BY WENDY WEHR

UNIVERSITY PARK — Hardware, software, networking, interfacing, micros, main-frames Are you ready to throw up your hands in despair? Are you convinced that, if it comes down to a choice between you and the computer on your dairy farm, you'll be the one to go?

But wait. Put the computer in perspective. It is merely a tool, one of many tools that you can use to manage your dairy operation. As a dairy farmer you are already a master of such items as feeding programs, herd reproductive management, and financial statements. You can use the computer to help you with what you're already good at.

Gaining perspectives on the computer — including the ever-changing advances in on-farm technology — was the goal of participants in this year's Penn State Dairy Computer Conference. On Thursday and Friday, Dec. 13-14, dairy farmers, representatives of agri-business and university personnel gathered for a round of presentations and hands-on-sessions about the applications of computers to the dairy business.

Sharing the latest research on feeding computers and milking parlor technology was University of Illinois dairy science professor Sidney L. Spahr. Also addressing the group during the two-day conference were Penn Staters' A.J. Heinrichs, Larry Muller, Art Hussey, Bill Heald, and Dan Burnitt. All phases of dairy computerization were covered in their presentations, and the attending dairy farmers also had several opportunities to try out some dairy management software in hands-on computer sessions.

Computer Applications at Illinois

At the University of Illinois farms, researchers are looking toward the future of dairying. They're testing electronic identification units and reviewing methods for automatic subclinical mastitis detection and automatic estrus detection — computer applications that were hardly dreamed of a few years ago. Dr. Spahr shared the results of these university studies, and commented on the feasibility and usefulness of farm computerization.

Computer feeders should be able to balance rations, automatically dispense concentrate, and keep feed records, outlined Spahr. But all of these functions rely on positive electronic identification of the cows.

While a lot of companies are marketing electronic identification units, Illinois is examining subdermal id and temperature units. The results of the studies, explained Spahr, show that the subdermal units are not accurate for temperature monitoring because they are not implanted deep enough to get away from the environment.

"Automatic temperature monitoring may not have a place in the automatic management system," cautioned Spahr

But there is no doubt that the dairyman can profit from electronic feeding. The research has shown, explained Spahr, that electronic feeders can pay in two ways. First, electronic feeding, by controlling grain and percent of protein with dual feed units, can increase production early in the lactation. Second, by controlling grain late in the lactation — feeding a cheaper ration to cows nearing drying off — feed costs can be reduced.

He also confirmed the profitability of weekly balancing of rations early in the lactation. But "once a month is probably often enough after the peak of lactation," he added.

While addressing the specifics of computer feeding in his Thursday presentation, Dr. Spahr reminded the farmers to keep the goals of computerization in mind. The objectives of electronics are to reduce labor per animal, reduce drudgery, improve animal performance, and improve decision-making — and ultimately to increase profit.

Mastitis and estrus detection

To follow his comments on developments in electronic feeding, Spahr's Friday presentation emphasized the total computerization of dairy management — particularly in the milking parlor.

Ideally, feed dispensing stalls, milk meters, activity tags, and milk conductivity units will all be linked to the management computer on the dairy farm. All will be

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