

# Crop Management Associations are cropping up statewide

**BY JACK HUBLEY**  
**STATE COLLEGE** — In the current cost-price squeeze farmers are being bombarded with plenty of advice from all points of the compass: keep meticulous records, increase efficiency and streamline your operation. Unfortunately, all this counsel is easier to dole out than it is to implement.

The farmer who spends his time trying to increase the profitability of his dairy, beef or swine herds finds little time to keep abreast of current events in his fields.

What the farmer needs, then, is a hired hand. A specialist trained to spot disease, weed and insect problems at a glance.

During the latter part of the 1970's, a handful of Centre County farmers came up with a solution in the form of what they termed Crop Improvement Associations.

"We spent a year kicking the idea around, and eventually incorporated as a non-profit organization in July, 1979," says Mel Brown, a 20-year veteran of the Centre County Extension program and one of the crop organization's founders. By September of the same year, Centre County hired its first technician to scout the 2,000 acres making up the initial 10 farms that enrolled in the pilot program.

Since 1979 the program has enjoyed steady growth, and

today the state's first crop management association (the new name more accurately reflects the purpose of the program, says Brown) employs two full-time technicians and two summer technicians to scout the 13,000 acres farmed by its 80 members. During the summer months all farms are visited weekly, with visits scheduled every two weeks throughout the fall, winter and early spring.

Six years later, a new crop of CMA's has taken root across the state. Bedford, Franklin, Columbia, Sullivan-Bradford (Sulbra) and Blair-Huntingdon were the next county associations to form, and last summer Lehigh and Northampton Counties joined to form the Lehigh Valley CMA.

As of April 1 of this year, Berks, Fulton and Clearfield-Jefferson (Clear-Jeff) had formed associations, and Brown reports that the Lycoming, Chester and Snyder-Union Associations should be getting off the ground this month.

Brown notes that CMA's are organized as cooperatives, with a five to nine-member board of directors chosen by the membership. Each board elects officers and hires technicians to handle a multitude of duties.

In addition to monitoring insect, disease and weed problems, technicians also measure each field and sample



Melvin Brown

plant tissues, soils and manure. Based on this data, then, the farmer and his technician can project seed and fertilizer needs for the coming year. Technicians also monitor plant populations and check yields and grain moisture levels at harvest time.

Other duties include assisting in sprayer calibration and scheduling comprehensive educational meetings for members.

"Record keeping is emphasized in this program," says Brown, who points out that record sheets are kept for each field, and a computerized crop record summary is developed for each farm.

The \$4 to \$5-per-acre cost is

money well spent, according to Brown, who says that the savings can be substantial. "I'm sure there has been a reduction in the amount of insecticide used across the state," Brown emphasizes, pointing out that many farmers spray their second and third cuttings of alfalfa for leafhoppers when this added "insurance" really isn't necessary. During 1983 and '84, Centre County CMA members averaged only one application per year, says Brown, adding that the cost of spraying for leafhoppers usually runs \$7 to \$7.50 per acre.

Savings have also been realized through reduced treatments for northern corn rootworm, he says. While some farmers had been treating their total corn acreage for northern corn rootworm, beetle surveys conducted during August have revealed that only about 10 to 15 percent of Centre County's corn acreage is in need of treatment.

But insecticide cost isn't the only expense that Centre County's technicians have been able to trim. A look at the total cost of seed, lime, fertilizer, herbicides and insecticides when harvesting corn silage after a legume crop, for example, reveals that farmers spent \$114.83 per acre in 1981, compared to \$70.20 in 1983. Per-acre alfalfa costs during the seeding year have also been reduced by \$19.50 during that same period.

Such results haven't gone unnoticed, and Mel Brown reports that as of last December, statewide CMA membership had reached 230 farms representing 45,000 acres. With this spring's crop of new associations, Brown estimates that today's membership probably totals 300 farms and more than 75,000 acres.

In response to the growing popularity of CMA's, the Pennsylvania Crop Management Association was formed in September of last year to coordinate efforts at the county level. Brown himself was named to head up the program as the state organization's newly appointed coordinator. Though the group works closely with Extension, Brown stresses that the CMA program is totally self-supporting.

"The program is an attempt at taking the technology available today and applying it based on information collected on the individual farms", Brown said. "Most farmers can do these things for themselves, but they don't have sufficient time, at the right time, to get the job done. So what they're really doing is hiring skilled labor," he concludes.

And Brown also pointed out the this same type of "skilled labor" is available in the form of consulting services offered by private agronomy concerns.

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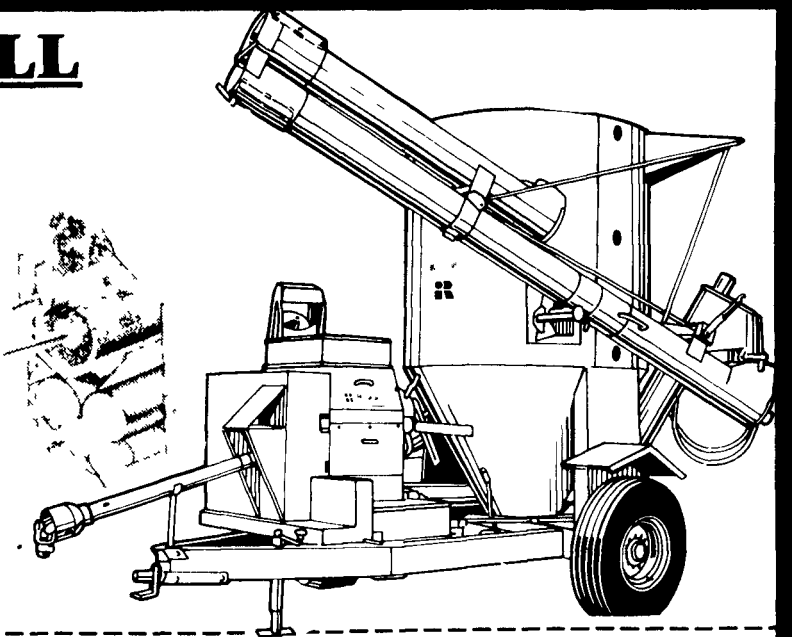
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