

Chinese use plastics to increase ag yields

COLLEGE PARK, MD. — Apparently Mr. Robinson had the right idea when he took Benjamin aside in the movie "The Graduate" and told him conspiratorially that the future boiled down to one word: Plastics.

At least that is the case in the People's Republic of China, according to the University of Maryland's Dr. Franklin D. Schales, an associate professor of horticulture.

"In the last five years, the Chinese have adopted plastics to produce food and fiber crops at a phenomenal rate," says Schales, "and that rate is expected to continue during the next five years."

The Chinese are not planting plastics and feeding them to their some 1 billion people.

Rather, they are adopting a technology that has been used in this country for some time

Plastics, primarily in the form of sheets and polyethylene film, are used to produce greenhouses and

row tunnels, and to provide a protective mulch for some crops. Row tunnels constructed from the plastics help to protect tender crops from wind damage and low temperatures, Schales explains. They also make it possible to extend the growing season for some crops. Clear plastic sheets, used as a mulch covering, increase soil temperature to allow farmers to plant earlier than they normally would during the growing season. They also improve plant growth and help to increase yields, according to Schales.

Using plastics also improves on-farm efficiency because it cuts down on labor and water needed to sustain some crops.

The increased use of plastics in China is indeed phenomenal, says Schales.

In 1981, the Chinese planted nearly 15,000 hectares with plastics. In 1984, the number of hectares cultivated under plastics grew to approximately 1.25 million hectares—primarily for cotton and

rice. A hectare is approximately 2.5 acres.

Says Schales, the Chinese have enjoyed a number of successes in agriculture since adopting the use of plastics on a wide scale.

These include higher yields, one of the Chinese main objectives in a society where, as recently as 35 years ago, citizens lived in a semi-colonial, semi-feudal environment.

"One of China's problems for some 4,000 years has been its inability to produce enough food to

feed its entire population," says Schales.

Not only are plastics helping the Chinese harvest more—in some cases two or three harvests of rice per growing season—they are helping them harvest earlier in the growing season. That means they can plant and harvest rice in the northern regions prior to frost, according to Schales.

Plastics are helping Chinese farmers in other ways, he adds.

They prevent soil compaction and the loss of nutrients from the

soil; reduce crop injury; increase soil temperature around crops and retain soil moisture; and, they make it possible to grow some crops on soils that normally would be alkaline.

Between 1975 and the year 2000, the Chinese hope to increase their agricultural productivity by 400%.

"In the last 10 years, plastics have played a role in meeting that objective," says Schales. "The Chinese expect that they will continue to play a major role"

CCC asked to extend loans for soybeans, feed grains

PARK RIDGE, IL. — The American Farm Bureau Federation has asked Agriculture Secretary John Block to extend the loan period on existing Commodity Credit Corporation loans on soybeans and feed grains. Farm Bureau requested the action to prevent any further price erosion in the market and as a means to aid financially pressed farmers.

The outstanding loans cover 190 million bushels of soybeans and 800 million bushels of corn and grain sorghum with a combined value of over \$3.5 billion. The current loans will mature in the next 30 to 60 days. Farmers with maturing CCC loans are faced with a choice of forfeiting the commodities or redeeming them at the face value of the loan.

In a message to Block, AFBF President Robert Delano said the loans will mature just as the new crop harvest enters the market. "With cash farm prices depressed

below the loan rate in many areas, many farmers will either be forfeiting their grain or redeeming it at a cost which they cannot recover on the present market," said Delano. "Such pressure on farmers will only add to the already tight credit problems many of them are facing."

Delano contended the extension can aid the government as well. "Forfeiture of the grain to the CCC will compound the government's problems associated with storing, handling and disposing of the stored grain it owns."

The farm leader requested the loan period be extended for nine months. "This will reduce some of the pressure on cash prices during the next few months, perhaps sufficient to encourage many producers to terminate their loans. In addition, it will help many producers avoid having to seek other sources of credit to carry them through the rest of this crop year," Delano said.



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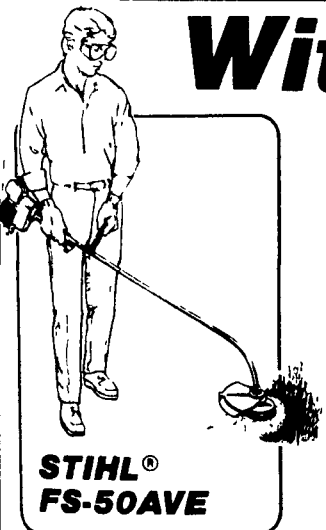
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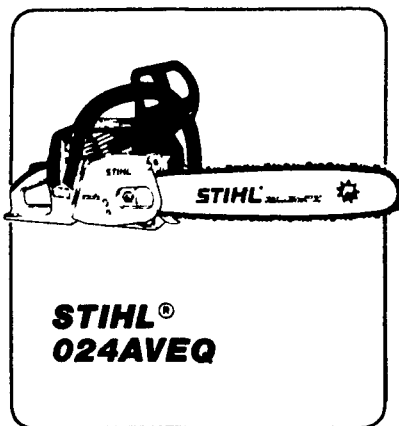
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