

Conservation directors urge ag assessment changes

BY BARBARA MILLER
Staff Correspondent

WILLIAMSPORT — Two resolutions concerning changes needed in calculating land use-values for the Clean and Green Program were passed recently at a meeting of the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation District Directors, Inc. at the Genetti-Lycoming Hotel in Williamsport.

Any change in use-values could have far reaching implications for state landowners participating in the Clean and Green Assessment Program.

A resolution was approved that PACDD would work with State Department of Agriculture to update the use-values of the Clean and Green Program during the soil resources committee meeting. Next, the committee voted to endorse a letter written by Dauphin County Board of Directors to Secretary Grubb on February 27. The letter cited two errors presently being made by PDA in calculating use-values which, combined, approximately double the use-values distributed statewide. Ways to remedy the situation were suggested.

According to the letter, one error lies in PDA's current use of a 15 percent ratio (based on September 1976 data) to compare net farm income to gross farm income. Given current conditions, it is estimated that this ratio should not be higher than seven percent.

Additionally, the capitalization rate used by PDA is 10 percent. Given current conditions, it is estimated that this figure should be between 13 and 17 percent.

The letter suggested PDA re-evaluate and change the net to gross farm income ratio and the capitalization rate. It advised the

necessary staffing adjustment be made to enable the Bureau of Agricultural Development to properly administer the program from a technical and administrative standpoint. Regular updating of figures used by the Clean and Green Program was also suggested.

The meeting was chaired by Russ Cassel of Dauphin County Conservation District who recently lost an appeal with the Dauphin County Board of Assessment concerning his 290-acre dairy farm in South Hanover Township. He challenged the county Board of Assessment's 1985 reassessment, which, in effect, simply doubled 1973 assessment of all real estate in the county. He plans to appeal the decision in county court.

Cassel discussed a meeting on February 14, in which he and Dave Ball, District Manager of DCCD, met with Fred Wertz, Bureau of Agriculture Development and Patricia Weiss, PACDD, and a representative of Sen. Helfrick's office to discuss the methodology that PDA uses in computing use-values of farmland. At the meeting they were informed by Wertz that a flaw had already been uncovered in PDA's method of computing use-values. It was discovered by Carol Breon, a math teacher from Clinton County.

Mrs. Breon, who was present at the committee meeting, said she is scheduled to reappear in court on March 24 in a case similar to Cassel's pertaining to reassessment and implementation of the Clean and Green Program.

Ball explained how PDA computes the use-values of farmland under the Clean and Green Program. Essentially, he said, the

Clean and Green Program allows less taxes paid to the county by farmers. Counties may or may not choose to use PDA use-values, according to Ball. Some counties use the use-values verbatim and some use them as a guide, but either way, he observed, "It is an important piece of paper that PDA sends out."

After computing land use-values based on current PDA Clean and

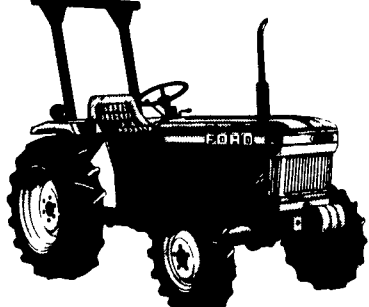
Green figures and then computing values based on more "realistic" figures, Ball concluded, "PDA is artificially doubling use-values going out to the counties. "PDA knows this but doesn't want to do anything about it."

Cassel noted it was not in PDA's budget to refigure use-values until

1990, but if pressured, the department will.

Ball predicts the Clean and Green reassessment figures will eventually be updated. "It's the only widely used agricultural retention program in the state," he added, "That's why it is so significant."


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