



Farm Talk

By
Jerry Webb

Two words that are important in today's low profit agricultural are innovation and change. Farmers who seem to be making it through this difficult period know the meaning of those words.

There has been a lot of talk about the change in agriculture but a lot of farmers haven't changed. They are operating just about the way they did 20 or 30 years ago. Oh, there have been some slight modifications but the practices

they learned from their fathers are still being used. The philosophies ingrained into their youthful minds stayed with them, and for the most part served them well. But when the easy profits disappeared those farmers unwilling to change found it difficult going.

I've heard many farmers ask when are things going to get back to the way they used to be. And the fact is that they aren't. Agriculture has changed and farmers must

change also. Those farmers who have not been able to adjust to change are the ones folding up in this difficult economy. On the other hand, those farmers who saw the change and made changes themselves are still on the farm.

Add to that the word, innovation, and you find some farmers who are doing pretty well. They are doing well because they have been able to look at their operation on a regular basis and make adjustments. They found new sources of financing. Other places to sell their produce at a better price. They stopped listening to those suppliers who were looking for a quick buck. And they've found ways to make money that were unheard of a decade or two ago.

Farmers in this area are in an awkward position because they have choices. Unlike their counterparts in Kansas, Nebraska or South Dakota they aren't locked into a two- or three- crop agriculture. Their harvest goes beyond corn and soybeans to include other crops and other ways to make money.

The farm magazines these days are full of interesting little ideas that farmers are trying-specialty crops, unusual livestock, innovative marketing techniques. Obviously all of them won't work on any one farm. But farmers are making them work in various ways across the country. Most of the ideas require more time and more management. Some of them require additional investments. They all require change and innovation.

It's easy to look to vegetable crops for new money on mid-Atlantic farms. But that market can be even worse than corn and soybean. Vegetables are hard to grow. They require considerable expense. Most of them don't store very readily and there is a very definite limited marketing op-

portunity.

And yet there are plenty of farmers who have started to raise some vegetables. Through good fortune and persistence they've found a specialty crop and a specialty market that suits their operation. And they are making it pay. Or they are taking some land and some roughage that's not being used otherwise and growing some beef animals. And then instead of just sending them off to market they're getting involved in the freezer beef business. Or they're raising a few lambs or some veal calves or turkeys or table eggs.

Some farmers operate roadside stands as simple as a picnic table and umbrella or as complicated as a small supermarket. A fairly modest roadside marketing operation and a few acres of fruits and vegetables can do a lot for sagging farm income and an under employment situation.

Then there are some of the people-oriented things that can be done on the farm like providing farm vacations, selling hunting rights, operating a camp ground and so on. Look at the farms that are only minutes away from the beaches on Delmarva that could provide low cost accommodations for beach goers along with the added advantage of a farm setting. It's not for everyone but it might work for a few. There are other farms especially those with access to water that could provide camp sites. Plenty of people are looking for a place to camp that's away from the crowded campgrounds—a place to set up a travel trailer for the summer with fishing and boating and a little open space near by.

I read about a farmer in the mid-West who is on the outskirts of a city. He's turned part of his farm into a picnic ground and meeting site, and it's become a big business

with thousands of people every year booking his facilities for company picnics, family reunions, retreats and so on.

The list of innovative ways that farmers can make money goes on and on. It's something that each farmer has to figure out for himself. What can he do beyond the usual crop rotation to improve his piece of the action. It demands a willingness to change, to try something new, to take on an enterprise that might even fail. But why not? A couple of acres of some specialty crop isn't going to be the difference between success and failure. At least not the first year. But it could be a start, a learning opportunity, a chance to get the feet wet before taking the big plunge. And it could tell a farmer whether he's cut out for some of these ways to make money.

There's only so much cost cutting a farmer can do. After he's cut all the costs possible he still needs to be able to make a living. And that's where a lot of farmers in this area find themselves these days. They've listened to all of the good information on how to grow corn and soybeans the most economical way. They've gotten rid of high priced ground, rented or owned that was unprofitable. They've sold off the excess equipment and they still don't see how they're going to make a living with current and projected incomes from corn and soybeans.

That's when it's time for innovation and change. There are other enterprises, other crops, other efforts that a farmer can do but it's a very personal thing. Something each farmer must do for himself. Something each farm family must consider. They can't all grow horseradish or provide vacation facilities.

They can't all grow corn and soybeans either.

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