



Farm Talk

By
Jerry Webb

Chemicals or Cultivation?

If I were growing corn or soybeans this spring, I would certainly be looking for the cheapest way to get a reasonable crop. That may be a different way of thinking than some farmers are used to. In the past high yields have meant bigger profits. But with two-dollar corn and five-dollar soybeans this isn't the year to pour on the chemicals and shoot for maximum yields. No, instead this is the year to find the cheapest way to get a crop in the ground with some assurance of a respectable yield next fall. And that may mean throwing out some of the technology of the past decade.

In fact, if you look through all of the technology of crop production since the beginning of time, you quickly realize there are some old methods that aren't very expensive and there are some new methods that aren't terribly expensive. Somewhere in that maze of options is a combination of minimum tillage and minimum chemicals that looks pretty good. Agricultural Experiment Station research and farmer trial and error at scattered locations around the country supports this thinking.

If you already have the equipment there's no cheaper way to plant a crop than with no-till. But then you are faced with an awesome chemical bill. And that stops a lot of farmers. Particularly those with serious financial troubles. So how about a combination: no-till planting, banded applications of herbicides and no-till cultivation. That may sound like a contradiction in terms but it's being done and it's working. Illinois researchers are cultivating no-till crops and getting less soil erosion, better run off control, more moisture to the plants and

better yields. Al Bueing a Glennwood, Indiana, farmer cultivated all of his 1,500 acres of row crops last year at least once and cut his herbicide bill in half. In Mississippi agricultural researchers report two to four-bushel yield increases from cultivating soybeans planted in stubble. Illinois researchers report 10 to 20 bushels more yield from no-till corn cultivation and an average seven bushels from no-till soybean cultivation.

Marshall McGlamery, an Illinois extension weed specialist, thinks more farmers will be using cultivators and banding herbicides in unplowed fields. He says it's a matter of economics. "They can do 90 percent of their weed control with cultivation and band their herbicides".

These innovators and researchers are using heavy duty cultivators with special sweeps that work the soil just under the mulch. They say normal cultivator shovels and light weight equipment doesn't work very well in unplowed fields.

If you are not set for no-till planting and no-till cultivation there's still something to be said for the economics of crop

production without the heavy reliance on herbicides. The financially pressed farmer who doesn't want to risk \$20 or \$30 an acre for chemicals might be better advised to do some conventional tillage and some old fashioned cultivating. Those old cultivators will still control weeds. They do take time and fuel but even then it might be a lot less expensive than heavy chemical use. When you look at the options and talk about least cost methods, cultivation looks pretty good. If you already have the equipment, and most farmers do have a cultivator, then there is not much out of pocket outlay—fuel costs and maybe wear and tear, but how much can that be on a tractor that's already a few years old and well depreciated.

That philosophy might seem absurd to the modern farmer who's used to planting his crop and paying somebody else to spray it while he looks for something to do until it's harvest time. Consider the cost of chemicals and custom applicators. Add to that land rent, seed costs and some of the other necessities and there isn't much room for profit. On the other hand if you trade herbicides for diesel fuel, then maybe there's some hope. It will take time, but what's that worth if the farmer is not gainfully employed doing something else.

That seems to be the dilemma of a lot of farmers. They have plenty of time between planting and harvest and not much of a way to put that time to work. So what's wrong with replacing some herbicides with some old fashion cultivation? Maybe not 100 percent but some combination.

There's little point in a financially troubled farmer planting another crop that isn't going to make money. So he must set a realistic yield and price goal now and then work back from there.

What are the fixed costs? What are the variable costs? What can he do to change them? If he adds them up and there doesn't seem to be any profit then he's really better off not planting. On the other hand, if he can adjust some of those variable costs and trade his own labor for herbicides and custom applicators then maybe there is room for some profit.

No doubt herbicide salesmen won't be all that pleased with this kind of thinking. But surely they realize that farmers in trouble have to find some relief. And surely their commitment to

agriculture includes helping those farmers find a way to make some money even if it means reduced chemical sales.

It's time for some farmers to break the mold, do a little thinking on their own and come up with some least-cost production methods that work for them. No-till planting combined with some cultivation and some herbicides could be an option. This is definitely not the year for a high stakes effort. Current commodity prices definitely call for realistic yield goals and scaled back costs of production.

Summer Promotions Mark 50th Dairy Month

WILLIAMSPORT — Dairy farmers nationwide will celebrate June Dairy Month for the 50th consecutive year through a \$1.5 million dollar promotion program using the theme, "Bring Home Real Dairy Freshness." The

stoneware commemorating June Dairy Month's golden celebration. Order forms will be available through supermarket displays and newspaper advertisements.

The stoneware collection includes a one-quart milk pitcher, a

program will be sponsored locally by the American Dairy Association and Dairy Council.

As in the past, the main elements of the dairy industry's summer promotion will be consumer media advertising and supermarket dairy case displays. Products being promoted are milk, cheese, butter, cream, sour cream,

butter dish, a creamer, and bowls. A 50th June Dairy Month imprint on the bottom of each piece is designed to increase collectors' interest.

The summer promotion will be run through the months of June and July. Supermarket displays will be installed during the end of May. Over 2,000 supermarkets in

whipping cream, cottage cheese and ice cream. A special display has been created for the ice cream section of supermarkets using the theme "Taste Summer."

To attract consumer interest, the promotion also includes an offer for consumers to purchase a set of

ADADC's area will carry the promotion. Pennsylvania supermarkets participating include Acme Markets, Giant Markets, Insalaco Markets, IGA Food Marts, IGA Independents, Wyoming Valley Distributor Independents, Uni-Marts, Stop 'N Go's and Time Markets.

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