

Pesticide Restrictions Bug Delaware Water Gap Farmers

BY ED SHAMY

Special to Lancaster Farming BUSHKILL — A property owner interested in and knowledgeable about farming can be the best landlord for farmers who cultivate rented fields. But when that landlord happens to be the federal government, the task of tending crops can be a problem as a small group of northeastern Pennsylvania and northwestern New Jersey farmers are quickly learning.

The 14 growers lease about 3,000 acres of cropland in the sprawling Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area that spreads from the Pocono Plateau in Pennsylvania to the Kittatinny Ridge in New Jersey.

They sow corn and small grains, hay, fruits and vegetables, most of it on rich bottomland that flanks the Delaware River and muscles the imposing mountains away from the river banks.

The property was first purchased by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the late 1960s and early 1970s for the proposed Tocks Island Dam, which would have blocked the Delaware and created a vast reservoir to supply the region with drinking water.

Plans for the reservoir were dropped after stiff opposition from environmentalists, but the federal government kept the land, which includes the Delaware Water Gap, and created the national recreation area.

The farmers, who compete in a bidding process for the right to rent the land and five-year leases, have had to adjust to ways of the federal government.

They are bound to implement the recommendations of the Soil Conservation Service. They cannot remove hedgegrows, no matter how bothersome the field breaks may be. They cannot remove timber adjoining the fields for firewood or fence posts. And they must agree to mow areas within the park set aside to lure wildlife.

But perhaps the most problematical of the strings attached to the federal contracts are the restrictions placed on pesticide uses. Unlike their counterparts on private lands, the farmers in the national recreation area are not free to apply pesticides without first requesting permission from the National Park Service and its parent agency, the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Traditionally, the growers have compiled a list of the pesticides they believe they will need before the growing season begins, usually in December or January, according to Elizabeth Johnson, a natural resource specialist at the Water Gap Recreation Area. The lists of chemicals are sent to Washington, D.C., usually approved by officials there, and then permission is granted for their use.

Tightened Regulations

But the park service last year began to enforce one of its own

rules that requires the government itself and anyone leasing the public lands to implement integrated pest management systems or sacrifice the use of many pesticides. Integrated pest management systems rely heavily on monitoring crops for a wide array of damages, and applying pesticides only when certain damage levels are reached and even then only sparingly.

The applications from the Water Gap area did not bear up under the scrutiny of the federal officials, who noted that farmers were basing their pesticide applications on past-use history and not on the current information being compiled through close observations of the weeds, insects and diseases affecting their crops. As a result, some of the chemicals that once were easily approved, including those that can control broadleaf weeds and other, more serious plant pests, have been placed off

limits to the farmers.

The solution to the problem seems easy to some of the growers, who this season are being forced to do without faithful weed killers they relied upon in the past.

John Michaels of Smithfield Township, Monroe County, lives near the 500 acres he uses to grow cash grains and feed for his horses. He says he has always walked the fields, checking them for damage and only applying chemicals when he is certain they are needed. Still, Michaels and other farmers like him may not keep the written records the federal government wants to see before it approves pesticides for use in the 70,000-acre park.

And others are not as lucky.

The recreation area covers parts of Northampton, Monroe, and Pike counties in Pennsylvania, and Warren and Sussex counties in New Jersey, and the park service has, by attribution, reduced the

number of people actually living within the parklands. There remains only a handful of residents, all of them renting the homes they once owned from the federal government.

As a result, most of the farmers leasing the bottomlands do not live as close to the fields they are tilling as does Michaels, and they cannot invest the necessary time to walk their fields. Some, said Elizabeth Johnson, lives as far away as Wayne County, Pa. They haul their field implements and tractors to the leased lands in May, plant corn and do not return until it is time to harvest in October.

A Possible Solution

Area agriculture officials are trying to help. Paul Craig, Monroe County's cooperative extension agent, is pushing for the creation of a crop management association that would hire a scout to do the field observations, keep the

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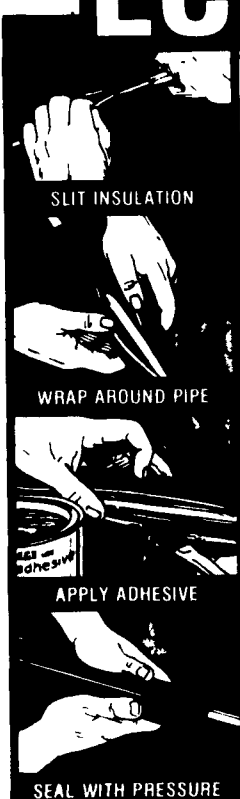
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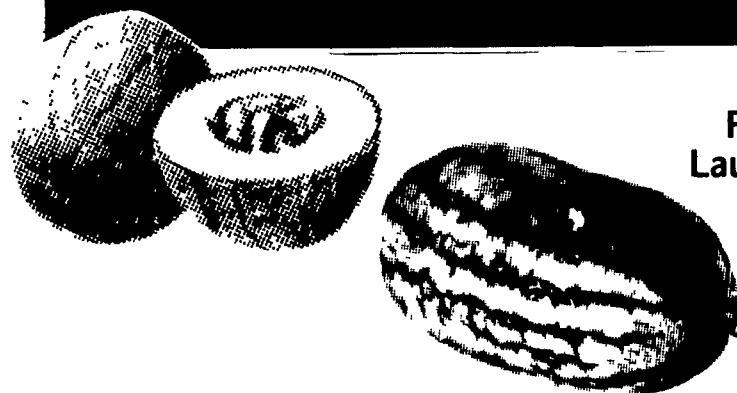
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