

# Renting Cropland: Know What You're Getting Before You Sign

NEWARK, Del. — Now is an excellent time for farmers to survey fields for potential production problems and to evaluate the yield potential of rented land.

"Anyone who rents or is considering renting farmland should carefully evaluate every field before making a deal to re-rent or to add more land to their operation," advises University of Delaware extension agricultural agent Derby Walker.

The first step in evaluation is to identify the noxious weed problems like johnsongrass, giant ragweed, burcucumber or Canada thistle. By law, these weeds must be controlled in Delaware. But, says Walker, several other plants—including spurred anoda, horse-nettle, shattercane, cocklebur and triazine-resistant weeds—are also very difficult to control in cropland.

"If your farm has a serious problem-weed infestation which will require special treatment for control, this will increase your production costs," the extension agent warns. "For example, if it normally costs you \$145 an acre to grow soybeans and the rent is \$50, a weed problem that costs \$10

extra to control could boost your production costs from a normal \$195 to \$205 an acre."

Other problems to look for when evaluating a field for possible rental are signs of nutritional deficiency, nematodes and soil-borne disease. "It's especially easy to spot these areas in soybean fields," Walker says. "At this time of year, the indicators usually are off-colored or stunted beans. Find out what's causing these spots. Sometimes you can tell by looking at the plants; other times, a soil sample and/or nematode test must be taken."

A field that's infested with soybean cyst nematodes can greatly alter cropping alternatives by limiting production to resistant soybean varieties and a crop rotation program to prevent yield losses. Nutritional problems will mean spending extra dollars to correct the deficiency and bring the field up to par.

Something else to look for in rented soybean fields is any symptom of Fusarium root rot or other soil-borne disease. These diseases often don't show up until late in the season when bean plants start to die. Sometimes entire parts of a field will be almost

totally wiped out.

"If there's root rot in a field," Walker says, "it's better not to plant soybeans there. Or try a resistant variety. However, fields that have been planted continuously in beans for several years may have so many disease organisms, that even resistant varieties will fail."

Because such production problems are common on the Delmarva peninsula, the county agent advises growers to evaluate field-by-field the land they plan to till. Just one field with a serious problem can threaten the profitability of an entire farm operation.

"If you're renting a piece of land now and encounter serious problems which boost your production costs by \$10 to \$20 per acre," Walker says, "ask yourself: Can I afford to till that field?" If production costs rise beyond the possibility of making a profit, that piece of ground is a guaranteed loss.

"Today," he says, "you can't afford to plant a crop into a field where you know you can't expect a return over cost because of a nematode infestation, nutritional imbalance of serious weed or

disease problem. If, on the other hand, you have options which can help increase your chances of making a profit, take advantage of them."

Farmers must also evaluate rental land for its yield potential. Some fields in Sussex County, for example, are so sandy that only small grains or soybeans can be profitably grown. Corn yields are just too low to break even unless irrigated.

"If the land won't normally produce acceptable yields," Walker says, "don't cash rent it. Even on a share-a-crop basis you must know your production costs so you aren't paying rent without the opportunity for a return on your investment. Some farmers have now gone to a sliding rent scale. The fee changes with both the yield and price at harvest."

It doesn't take very long to evaluate a farm for its rental potential, Walker says. "Basically

it's a matter of looking over the land, making notes as you go, jotting down your production costs, adding a rental value plus any additional expenses imposed by special problems, and then determining what you feel is a legitimate yield potential for the farm. If you know the market value of the crop you plan to grow, it isn't hard to figure out whether you can afford to rent that piece of ground under that particular cropping system."

With \$2 corn and \$5 soybeans, it takes a sharp farm manager to stay in business, the county agent concludes. "The cheaper you can produce a bushel, the more likely you can survive these tough times," he says. "Everything must be done right the first time, if you hope to make a profit. If the rent's too high for the productive potential of the land, you won't make it. Till only land that gives you the opportunity to make a profit."

## Water Testing Information Available

Penn State extension water specialists have prepared timely information on the whys and wheres of having your water tested and will have that information at the College of Agriculture Building

at Ag Progress Days, August 19-21.

Pennsylvania has more than 100 laboratories that check private water supplies for bacteria and a number of labs that analyze drinking water for metals, minerals, pesticides, organics and even radioactive substances. For a list of what types of tests are available and which laboratories in your county provide the services you need, pick up a list at the "Water Quality in Your Home" exhibit in the College of Agriculture Building.

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