

Lehigh-Northampton Extension To Merge

BY ED SHAMY

Special to Lancaster Farming
Experimentation has long been part of the cooperative extension service in Pennsylvania. But it has come traditionally in the laboratories and test plots of Penn State University.

Now, spending cutbacks in the federal budget are requiring the extension service to do some experimentation on its own operations in Lehigh and Northampton counties.

The neighboring counties, hit with the attrition loss of county agents since the late 1970s, are beginning to cooperate and are taking steps toward merging their operations.

Penn State officials admit they are watching the Lehigh and Northampton activities with a careful eye, trying to determine if they can offset financial funding setbacks in other parts of the commonwealth with similar mergers.

Since July, Lehigh and Northampton have shared a common extension director. They are poised to hire a horticulturist to serve both counties and this week (EDITORS: WEEK OF DEC. 8) began screening applicants for a food and nutrition post.

It may be just a matter of time before the two operations share an office.

"As the federal dollars are decreased, we're going to have to look more and more to the state and counties for help," said Dr. Wayne Hinish, an associate director of Pennsylvania's extension service at Penn State.

So far, the counties have been shouldering the responsibility.

Lehigh County commissioners and Northampton County council

members have agreed to include \$13,500 in their respective 1987 fiscal year budgets to pay for a horticulturist.

When the position is filled, in the first months of next year, it will pay about \$18,000 annually. The rest of the money will go toward employee benefits and the counties' share of unemployment insurance.

Extension service executive committee members in the two counties support the joint employee proposal.

Robert Leiby, who directs the extension service offices in Lehigh and Northampton counties, said many of the officials were convinced of the need for a horticulturist earlier this year, when two sets of statistics were assembled to support the need.

The Pennsylvania Nurserymen's Association estimated that the sale of horticultural, nursery and sod products in the two counties generated \$36.2 million in sales annually, said Leiby.

And calls to the two offices in which horticultural information was requested were monitored for three weeks in April and May.

During the period, 844 calls came into the two offices — some from the 670 commercial growers and others from amateurs — and more than 100 of the calls never received a response because of the heavy workload of the county agents.

Leiby is an agronomist, specializing in potato crops. His colleague in Lehigh County, Dave Dunbar, specializes in dairy sciences. Cynthia Walls, also an agent in the Lehigh office, specializes in family topics such as financial management and sociology.

Lehigh County has been without

a horticultural agent since the late 1970s.

Northampton County has done without an agent assigned specifically to horticulture since 1984. There were four agents in the county office when Joel Simmons resigned his horticulturist job to accept a post elsewhere.

In March, extension home economist Mary Ellen Newman left the Northampton County office to accept an extension job in Maryland. She was not replaced.

In June, Northampton County Extension Director Charles Forney retired, taking with him his knowledge of horticulture. He was not replaced.

The attrition left dairy specialist Greg Solt and 4-H agent Beth Teaford to hold down the fort.

Leiby joined them in July, and has had to learn the mechanics of working in another country.

Lehigh and Northampton counties have different forms of government and the bookkeeping tasks for which he is responsible are different in the two counties. He said he spends about a day a week in Northampton County, contributing where he can his agronomy skills.

This week, Leiby, Walls and Penn State representatives began sifting through the applications for the new home economist position they will fill in Northampton County. The position will be funded by Penn State with a blend of state and federal funds, said Leiby.

That has been the traditional form of placing agents in Pennsylvania's counties, with the university supplying the specialists and paying their salaries and the counties providing office space, clerical workers and vehicles.

Leiby said the Northampton home economist would be hired for food and nutrition skills, to complement Walls' family management skills in Lehigh County. The pair could then assist in one another's counties, he said.

The home economists' job, which will also pay about \$18,000 a year to start, should be filled by Feb. 1, he said.

After the extension agents are all in place, attention may have to turn to office space, according to Leiby.

For years, rumors have circulated that the Lehigh County extension service would be removed from the county courthouse in Allentown.

With space in the courthouse at a premium, county commissioners could at any time decide to make the building available only to

court-related offices and require the extension service to move.

"Potentially, we would look at making one central office" with Northampton County, he said.

Northampton County now has its extension offices in the Gracedale complex in Upper Nazareth Township, just west of Nazareth.

Hinich of Penn State said officials at the university would watch the Lehigh and Northampton activity with interest as a possible solution to cutting costs.

"It will be decided entirely by the two counties," said Hinich. "We would look favorably upon it."

He said he expected to discuss with Leiby next summer how practical the task of managing both county offices was for one director.

Dairymen Inc. Returns \$16.4 Million

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Members of Dairymen Inc. who market milk through their 18-state regional milk marketing cooperative are now receiving equity checks and equity reinvestment confirmation notices totaling \$16.4 million.

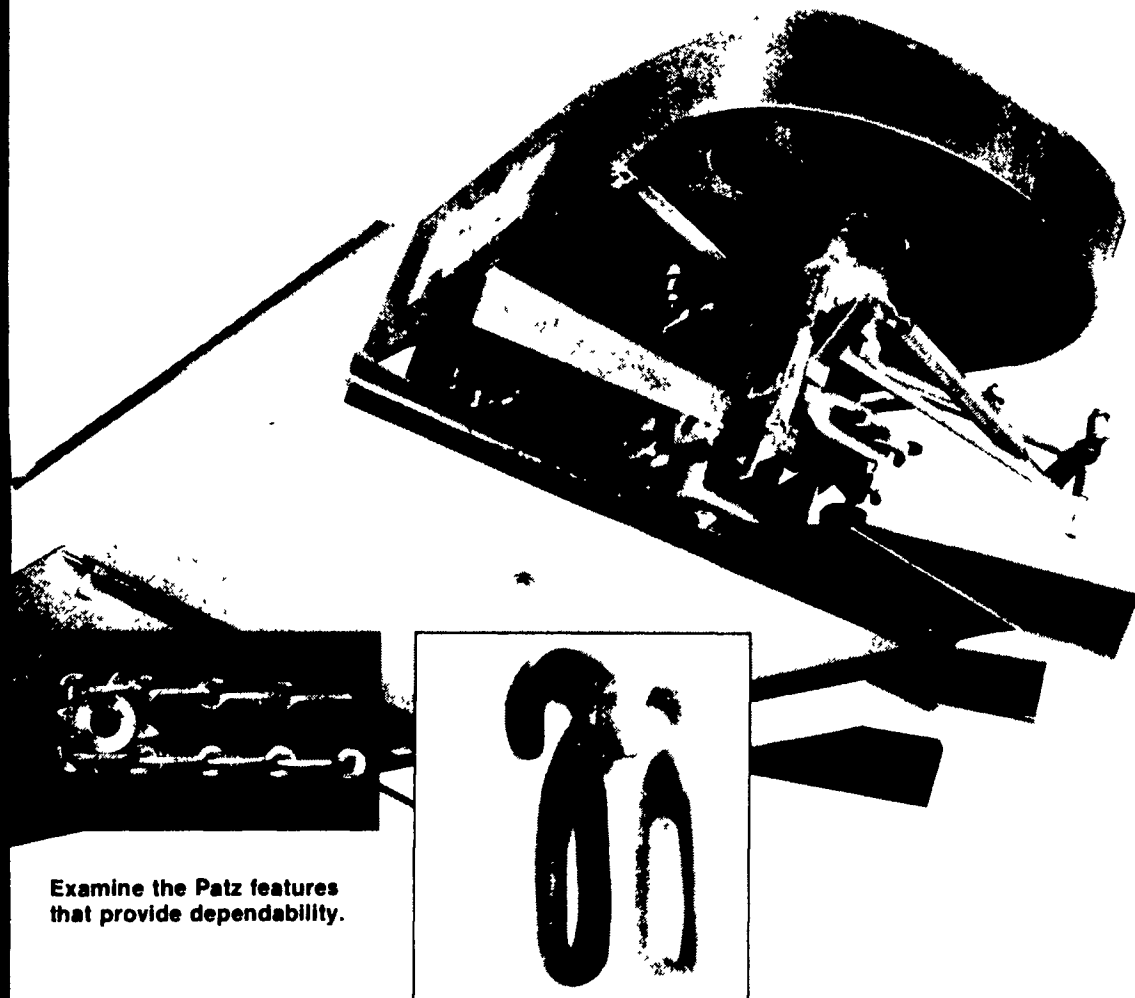
This payment to approximately 8,000 equity holders throughout the middle Atlantic and southeastern states represents the retirement of \$13.8 million of per unit capital retains and patronage dividends allocated to members' accounts for the fiscal year which ended Aug. 31, 1986, together with the retirement of approximately \$2.6 million of Member Equity Reinvestment Program — Series 1983 investments eligible for redemption.

Dairymen's Corporate Board of

Directors authorized the retirement of this member equity at its September 1986 board meeting. Each year the board must take the necessary action to authorize the retirement of member equity under the cooperative's revolving program. This year equity was again retired on a five-year revolving cycle — one of the shortest retirement cycles in existence among dairy cooperatives.

Dairymen members have invested in their cooperative \$88 million at the close of the fiscal year on Aug. 31, 1986. This strong member equity position is important for Dairymen in carrying out its marketing programs and in continuing to retire member equity on such a short revolving cycle.

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