

Women's Ag Forum Learns Marketing Is Key

BY SHARON P. SCHUSTER
Maryland Correspondent
ANNAPOLIS, Md.—Over 150 people attended the two-day Women's Agricultural Forum in Annapolis on November 18 and 19. Participants in the forum heard experts in the field of agriculture, met with others involved in production of agricultural products, and were afforded a glimpse of the future.

"You can not stop technology," declared the featured speaker, Dr. Lowell Catlett, Ag Economist with New Mexico State University. "Either embrace it or hide your head in the sand," he continued. Dr. Catlett estimated that by the year 2000, there will be 500,000

commercial robots in the U.S. "Agriculture will be a big user of robotics," predicted Dr. Catlett. He reported on several patents for the use of robotics in agriculture at the present. Robots measure soil conditions and precisely apply what is needed. Robotic tractors and harvesters are also in the works. Even the "oracle," a robotic sheep shearer is working at a fast clip at five times the rate of a man or woman shearer. "Of course it nicks a few now and then," quipped Catlett.

Dr. Catlett also addressed the issue of genetic engineering in plants and animals. With the identification and transference of a gene from one species to another,

plants and perhaps animals will be more productive and disease resistant. The Ag Economist spoke of a color producing gene implanted into the cotton plant to produce blue cotton. Scientists expect to be able to transfer the oil and acid producing genes of other useful plants to the tumble weed. Tumble weed, which grows prolifically in the desert, "will be a major cash crop in the west," said Catlett.

Dr. Catlett added to the list of wonders in the works, citing cheese that will be resistant to virus, yeast with no alcohol content, plants that destroy nematodes, and solar cows.

Looking further into the crystal ball, Dr. Catlett estimated that "we

will see five hundred times what we've seen in the last twenty years" in the area of scientific advancement. "About 85 percent of all the scientists who ever lived are still practicing their craft," he added. "Robotics and genetics are changing the structure of agriculture. Get ready - it's going to be a part of your life," he advised.

A panel discussion, moderated by Dr. Raymond J. Miller, Dean of the College of Agriculture at the University of Maryland, focused on the role that women play in agriculture.

"It's sad that women are moving off the farms to get outside jobs," commented Lynn Hoot, Executive Secretary of Maryland Ag Com-

mission. "Women can be involved through promotion of Ag products, and in developing markets. You don't have to be big to be profitable," she added.

If there was a recurring theme throughout the forum, it was "diversify." Bud Kerr of U.S.D.A. Office for Small Scale Agriculture, said "diversification seems to be the answer." He cited cases of higher profit margins in non-traditional ventures such as pick-your-own crops, aquaculture, and bed and breakfast operations. He also reported on the newly established buying station in Western Maryland which provides an outlet for black walnuts.

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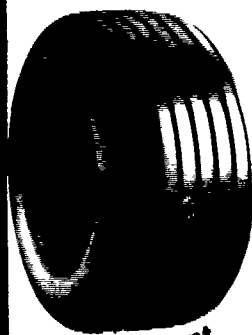
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