The High Cost Of A Low-Input Strategy

ATLANTA, GA — Conventional crop production practices are coming under increasing pressure. State and federal governments and environmental groups are concerned with protecting the environment, especially groundwater. Congress has given the USDA a mandate to pursue programs of low-input crop production systems. The thrust of the USDA effort has developed into the study and promotion of organic farming concepts, called LISA, an acronym for Low-Input Sustainable Agriculture.

The prime objectives of the LISA program are to reduce fertilizer and pesticide use, grow forage legumes in rotation with all grain crops, and diversity cash grain farms to livestock/grain farms. Some of these organic farming practices are beneficial, especially for the small livestock farmer. However, the introduction of unresearched low-input practices into mainstream agriculture could be at a high cost to farmers, to the total agricultural economy and to the environment.

Studies at universities in the Midwest have shown that the widespread adoption of organic farming practices would reduce crop yields 15 to 25 percent. These studies also indicate that the supplies of corn and wheat available for export would be reduced to 25 percent of present levels. Saving money on inputs becomes a high cost to farmers as lower yields lead to lower profits. The key is to focus on reducing costs per unit of production, not necessarily on costs per acre.

Low-input systems have the high cost of greater environmental risks.

Contrary to a common perception, animal manures and legumes produce higher risks of leaching nitrate-nitrogen to the groundwater than with commercial fertilizer. Some of the most serious environmental problems associated with agriculture have resulted from storing and application of animal manures. Recent Michigan research reported that more than six times as much nitrate-nitrogen accumulated at the 5-foot depth in soils under growing corn following alfalfa, and nearly five times as much from manure use than from applied fertilizer.

The environmental benefits claimed for low-input systems are not supported by scientific evidence.

Low-input systems lead to a high cost food supply. There is no new land. Reduced yields in low-input systems will decrease the total productive capacity of the U.S.A. and threaten world food supplies which have depended on this country as a stable source. Maintaining total production in low-input systems will require bringing into production millions of acres of less desirable soils with a higher potential for erosion. The result would be higher food prices as reserve grain stocks disappear.

We must maintain the U.S. agricultural productive capacity and competitive position as a supplier of high-quality products in a world market. Sustaining our agricultural productivity does not involve radically changing the system, but rather continued improvement of production agriculture through development and implementation of best management practices.

Chicken Production Running Strong On Delmarva

ANNAPOLIS, MD. — Chicken growers on Delmarva continue to place more birds per week than they did a year ago according to the Maryland Agricultural Statistics Service.

For the first 11 weeks of 1989 (through March 18th) growers had placed over 10 million chickens per week and have exceeded the year before weekly totals for nine of the 11 weeks.

The year's highest weekly placement came during the week ended February 25th, when an estimated 10,617,000 day-old chicks were placed in grow out houses on Demarva.

It's good business for farmers as the average price received per pound was up 40 percent in January and 37 percent in February.