

To Chop Or Not

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Now is the time when farmers are considering options for postharvest management of leftover cornstalks and other crop residue. And the question many are asking is, "To chop or not to chop?"

Before deciding whether to chop cornstalks or leave them intact, several factors should be considered, said Lynn Hoffman, senior research associate in Penn State's College of Agriculture.

Proper management of crop residue has become widely accepted as a means to reduce soil erosion. To keep as much residue as possible on fields, Hoffman said he generally recommends leaving cornstalks alone. If chopped, he said, the smaller pieces may be blown or washed away by wind or rain.

But there are circumstances in which chopping may be the best option.

"If you plan to use secondary tillage equipment, such as a field cultivator or harrow, after planting in the spring, you'll probably want to chop the cornstalks," Hoffman said.

"A lot of secondary tillage tools

don't have enough clearance to allow those uncut stalks to pass through without plugging up the machinery. But if the stalks won't present a problem with secondary tillage, I'd recommend you leave them alone."

If you use a corn-picker to harvest your corn, cutting the stalks also might help to distribute the material more uniformly over the field. "But if you use a combine," said Hoffman, "it usually will shred the stalks enough to give you reasonably uniform distribution without chopping them."

Some farmers who chop their cornstalks in the fall perform some type of tillage operation to partially cover the cut stalks and keep them in place. But Hoffman says there are risks in that practice.

"You have to be careful that you don't violate the conservation plan assigned to the farm or to that particular field," he said. "You have to

be aware of and follow normal erosion control measures."

Hoffman said some farmers chop cornstalks thinking that it will help control insects, such as corn borers. But he said that's not necessarily true.

"We've never been able to demonstrate that chopping the stalks reduces the number of insects enough to have an effect on next year's production."

If you plan to use a no-till drill to plant alfalfa or oats in the early spring, then you are better off not cutting leftover cornstalks, according to Hoffman. "When there's still a little frost and the stalks are stuck fast to the ground, you get less plugging of the grain drill when the stalks are left intact," he said.

For additional information on managing crop residue, contact the Penn State Cooperative Extension office in your county.

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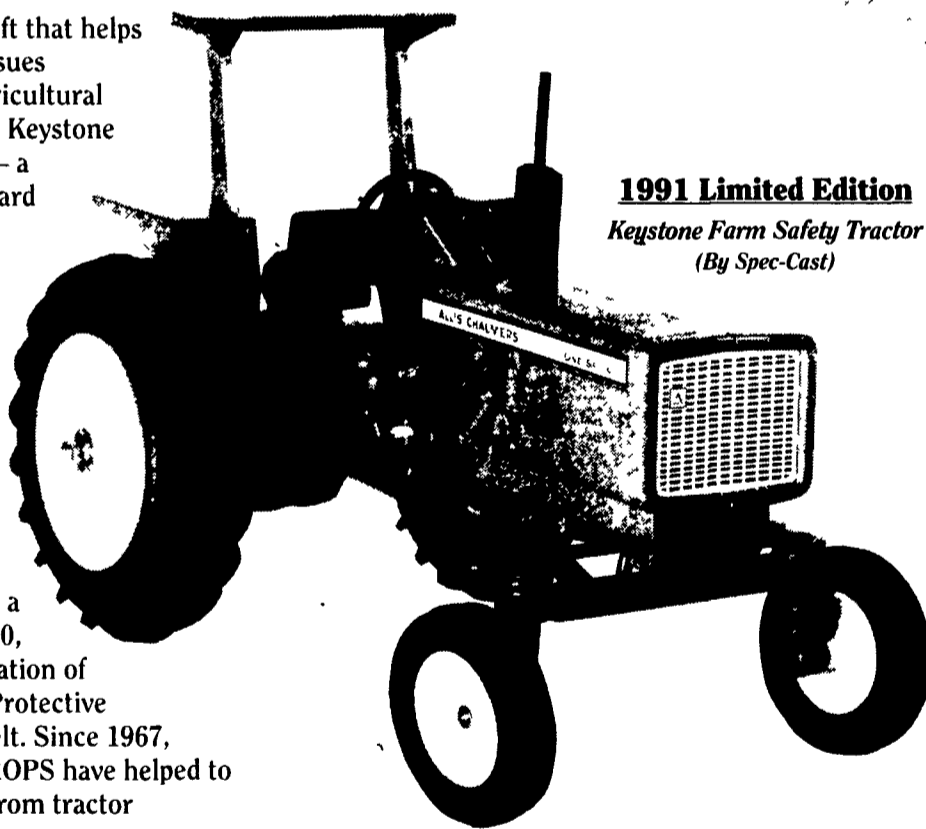
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