

Ag Letter Looks At Drought

READING (Berks Co.)— Farmers throughout southcentral and southeastern Pennsylvania suffered huge crop losses in the summer of 1991, one of the driest in recent memory.

Along with everybody else, farmers were wondering what that drought will mean. Is it part of a normal weather pattern? Was it a freakish occurrence? Will the local climate become hotter and more arid?

According to Penn State meteorologist Paul Knight, the summer of 1992 is almost certain to be wetter than the summer just past. Although the 1991 drought was severe, it was well within the normal range of summer weather, Knight reported in the most recent issue of Meridian Bank's Ag Letter.

The Ag Letter is mailed periodically to farmers and agribusinessmen in Meridian's service area. Meridian is one of the largest ag lenders in the Northeast.

In most recent years, according to Knight, the cultivated fields have been covered with lush spring growth. The early growth helps keep the ground cool by reflecting sunlight. In 1991, the fields did not have that early spring cover. The dark-colored earth absorbed sunlight. It heated up and stayed hot, which was why the region suffered through a heat

wave as well as a drought.

"What happened this summer was a blocking weather pattern that came into southern and southeastern Pennsylvania and just stayed," Knight said. "It's not likely to happen two years in a row, and it's certainly not going to happen every year. In 1991, the block came in at the worst possible time, early May, when the crops needed rain and cloud cover to germinate and get off to a good start."

Most of us, farmers and non-farmers alike, can't do anything about the weather except hope for the best. But, Paul Clugston, who farms outside Halifax in Dauphin County, has taken a more active course.

Clugston's farm is hilly and has soil types that don't retain water very well. His income derives from the sale of milk from a dairy herd, and chicken from a flock of broilers. Clugston needs his 223 acres of farmland both to produce feed for his cows and to dispose of the manure from the dairy animals and the chickens.

Like most dairymen in the area, Clugston grows corn, alfalfa and some ryegrass for dairy feed. For many years, that's all he grew, but he was constantly worried about dry summers.

Four years ago, he took part of the land he ordinarily would have

planted with corn and instead planted sudangrass. Sudangrass is a relative of corn, but it doesn't produce ears and is much more tolerant of drought.

In another Ag Letter article, Clugston said not everybody could benefit from his cropping scheme. It did very well for him this summer, though, because his

soil types, combined with the hot, dry weather, were extremely unfavorable for corn production.

Even the sudangrass was hurt somewhat. In a more normal year, Clugston said he would expect to get three cuttings of sudangrass for animal feed. In the summer of 1991 he was able to get only two cuttings.

In addition to its drought resis-

tance, sudangrass removes two to three times as many soil nutrients - nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium - as does a crop of corn. For livestock-intensive farms such as Clugston's, this can be a valuable management tool to help stem the runoff of soil nutrients into nearby streams. It can also help control the leaching of nitrates into groundwater supplies.

State Grange Makes Dairy Nomination

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — A Newport farmer with more than 50 years of dairy experience has been nominated by the Pennsylvania State Grange to serve on the National Dairy Promotion and Research Board.

Robert Gabel, owner-operator of the 250-acre, 100-head dairy farm where he was born and raised, is also being supported by other major farm organizations and dairy cooperatives. He is a 46-year member of Oliver Grange in Perry Co.

If appointed to this three-year term, Gabel will help make decisions and oversee the Board's \$80 million yearly budget. The Board's main responsibility is the promotion and advertising of dairy

products.

Gabel serves on the Board of Directors for Eastern Milk Producers Cooperative Association, Inc., the Pennsylvania Grange Dairy Committee, and the advertising and promotion agency for the Middle Atlantic Milk Marketing Area.

Some of the other organizations which Gabel is a member of include Pennsylvania Beef Council, Pennsylvania Animal Health and Diagnostics Commission, Pennsylvania State Council of

Farm Organizations, Perry County Ag Land Preservation Board, and the Dairy Herd Improvement Association.

Gabel has also won several awards and honors, including Master Farmer Award in 1987, Blue and Gold Award from Newport FFA Chapter in May 1990, and a citation for Perry County Farm Family of the Year in 1976.

He and his wife Berneice reside on Barnview Farm in Newport with their two children.

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