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Counties Process Complete Using Laptops

PAT TORETTI
DRPC ARIS Adm.

Pennsylvania DHIA's program for putting laptops in the hands of its technicians is paying big dividends, now that a large majority of field employees have mastered the program. "About 130 of 175 technicians are now released to transmit data to the DHIA processing center," says Dean Amick, field services director. "For February, the first month in which we have good comparisons on stats for herds sent either electronically or under the old manual system, our turn-around time was 4 days from date of test to the mail for herds prepared on paper, versus only 2.9 days for the electronically submitted herds. Owing to some changes in the lab and even more technicians coming on-line, the numbers for the first week of March look even better; about 3.5 days to ship for paper herds, and only 2.5 days for electronic transmission," says Amick. Beth Kelchner, a Senior Technician from Lycoming County, relates a now common experience: "I tested a herd Friday night and Saturday, sent the transmission and samples on Saturday. The dairyman called me to tell me his papers were in his mailbox on Tuesday, he was so pleased."

Jim Boyer, DRPC manager for Pa DHIA agrees. "The turnaround time statistics are very good. Quick return has always been an important dimension of our business. Although we've always enjoyed big advantages over other DHIAs where the lab tests are done one place and processing is done somewhere else, it's quite an achievement to be able to knock a full day off turnaround time."

Other advantages cited by Boyer include the reduction in errors and records correction expected at the outset of the project. "Overall, we've been able to reduce the number of herds with errors by about a third for those that are prepared on laptops.

That's still conservative when you consider that until very recently we weren't enforcing all the data edits on PC's, in order to give technicians time to adjust. When the folks in the field are more comfortable with the program and the edits get more stringent, we're looking to double or triple that improvement."

The program is rapidly gaining momentum. For February, the first month in which full statistics on the program were available, about 2,500 of the 3,800 herds processed were sent electronically. While that is nearly two thirds of all herds processed, Dean Amick sees a time when only a tiny fraction of herds will actually be sent on paper. "Some owner sampler herds, new herds or herds witih special problems may come in that way, but the future is really already here. It's quite a change from the days back in 1957 when we first computerized and our turnaround time went from same day to 'only' 30 days. I guess the computer guys are finally catching up with the field."

"Already we've had counties that have processed completely on laptops for several months. York was the first to go all electronic, and has been submitting herds that way for about 5 months now. The region manager for that area, Dave Shenk, deserves a lot of credit for pushing the program."

The implementation of PC's in the field has not been without some adjustments, DHIA staffers note. A help desk to support DHIA field employees throughout the state had to be established. The DHIA laboratory, long accustomed to running ahead of the data entry operation, has had to make some changes. And the data entry staff itself, from a high of nine employees a decade ago, has fallen to only two. The biggest changes, of course, have come for DHIA's field technicians. "That's been the bright spot of the whole thing for me," says Boyer. "We've taken our time with this to insure as much as possible that the laptop program was a technicians program rather than a processing center program. We've had a small core of technicians, Anne Brooks in Centre County, Ron Morgan in Mifflin, and Arlen Crider in Franklin who've been working closely with us for almost two years. Then we involved a larger pilot group that's refined the program further over the last year or so. They pretty much designed their own Barnsheet program. And that group hasn't been shy about asking for changes. Many of our technicians have a surprising amount of computer experience, and many more have a genuine aptitude for the work. Still, it's been a big adjustment. Almost a culture change. They've done an outstanding job."

Caren Dodd of Erie County admits that in the beginning there was some extra work, and a few adjustments to make, but overall is quite pleased with the program. "AP herds really appreciate getting their factored milk weights on test day. And the computer adds some prestige to the job."

What's next for the DHIA laptop program? "We wanted to concentrate most heavily on the initial training for the Barnsheet program," Amick says. "But now that technicians are comfortable with the program, we're ready to really take off. The simple test day reporting features in the Barnsheet, like milkweight calculations and data editing, will be vastly improved by the addition of full capability for on-farm reporting in the next few months. We'll be concentrating on hammering out the last details of data entry, and moving technicians toward more and more realtime reporting at our Spring Conferences, which start at the end of this month."

Average Farm Feed Costs For Handy Reference

To help farmers across the state to have handy reference of commodity input costs in their feeding operations for DHIA record sheets or to develop livestock feed cost data, here's this week's average costs of various ingredients as compiled from regional reports across the state of Pennsylvania. Remember these are averages so you will need to adjust your figures up or down according to your location and the quality of your crop.

Corn, No. 2y - 3.11 bu. 5.57 cwt.
Wheat, No. 2 - 3.53 bu. 5.89 cwt.
Barley, No. 3 - 2.49 bu. 5.33 cwt.
Oats, No. 2 - 1.71 bu. 5.34 cwt.
Soybeans, No. 1 - 6.65 bu. 11.10 cwt.
Ear Corn - old 80.00 ton 4.51 cwt.
Ear Corn - new 90.10 ton 4.51.
Alfalfa Hay - 113.25 ton 5.66 cwt.
Mixed Hay - 111.00 ton 5.55 cwt.
Timothy Hay - 108.75 ton 5.44 cwt.

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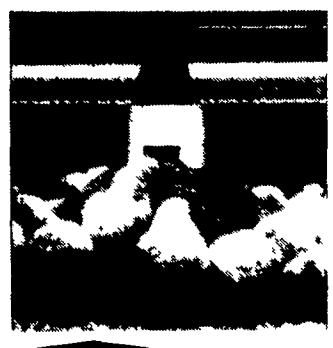

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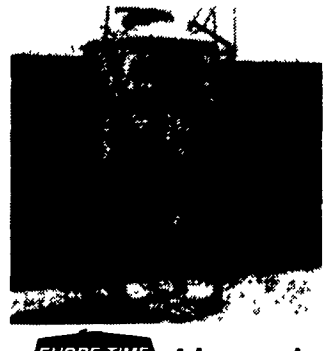

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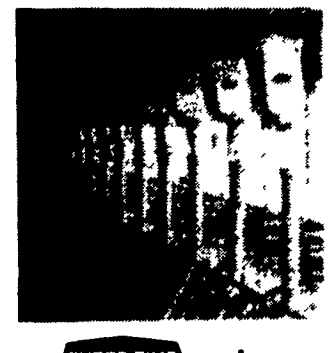

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