

# Lancaster Farming

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## Series Examines Silo Safety

### Farmers Tell Of Experiences With Deadly Silo Gas, Molds

Editor's note: This is the first of a three-part series.

ANDY ANDREWS

Lancaster Farming Staff

CONESTOGA (Lancaster Co.)

— Rodney Martin, Ken Kirkland, Ted Ferris, and Michael Schutz all share a common memory. It's a memory filled with a great deal of pain, anger, and anxiety.

And it's a pain that, under worse circumstances, could have turned deadly.

At the same time, if they knew then what they know now, the pain could have easily been avoided.

In the telling of their experiences, each one hopes that farmers would listen carefully and try to avoid the mistakes they made regarding what happened to them or someone they knew on the farm years ago.

Rodney Martin

Dairyman Rodney Martin blames not getting to the silo and doing the work when it should have been done.

Rodney was backlogged with work to do in the dairy barn, and didn't have time to return to the newly-filled 20-foot by 70-foot haylage silo to level it off. The silo was filled about 2 a.m. on May 25, 1994. Rodney returned to the silo about 12 hours later, on a hot afternoon, to hook up a blower to the pipe leading into the top of the silo.

Rodney knew some of the deadliest gas in the world — nitrogen dioxide, as the scientists called it — lurked at the bottom of a "valley" created by the filling. Looking from the top of the silo, he could easily make out the dark, greenish-brown gases in the

valley.

The blower wasn't clearing the gases at all. Rodney learned, later on, that the air was simply going up the pipe, through the top of the silo, and down the other side. He had an idea. The only way, he thought, to get to the gases was to open a series of access doors on the inside chute.

So, after 15-20 minutes of blowing fresh air into the chute, Rodney began the climb up. His plan was to throw open the door and quickly climb to a higher level above the gases. Simple, he thought. Just get the door open right at silage level, so instead of the air jumping over the top, the silo gas could simply drop down and away from the silo.

"In theory, that should have worked," said Rodney. "In fact, that's what I eventually did."

Rodney's brother Jere had gone up there before, and gases were already ejecting from the chute. Jere quickly came down, and complained to Rodney that he already felt nauseous, that he about passed out, he could hardly stand, and felt pretty sick. Jere told Rodney "don't go up there, whatever you do."

So the brothers stood and debated what to do. Rodney decided he would climb as fast as he could, open a door, and move quickly to a higher level.

The split second he threw the door open, Rodney knew something hit him.

"A cloud of gas hit me, dark gas, and it surprised me," he said. "I knew it would happen. But it surprised me that it hit me so fast."

Rodney got about two whiffs of

the toxic gas and could feel it burn the whole way down his throat.

Rodney managed to crawl above the reeling gas, far enough to get some fresh air. Still feeling the burning pain, and lightheaded,

(Turn to Page A24)



What's this device? Turn to page A20 to find out how scientists are looking for ways to monitor plant health.

### State Budget Doesn't Cut Agriculture, Reinstates Some Programs

VERNON ACHENBACH JR.

Lancaster Farming Staff

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.)

— The state's 1994-95 budget was passed by the state legislature and signed by the governor last week, two weeks ahead of deadline.

The only apparent hitch was an error discovered in the final version that inadvertently eliminated

taxes for trucking that would have created a \$90 million shortfall. The legislature has approved correcting that mistake.

In general, the \$15.7 billion budget package cuts welfare benefits and also some business taxes, while putting more money toward schools and prisons, according to published reports and government officials.

For the state's leading industry, agriculture in effect had some funding restored from last year's budget, and seemed to signal a reverse in a trend of annual cuts to agriculture that have occurred under Gov. Casey.

Casey, who as governor signed his final budget plan, has in past years used his line-item veto powers to either eliminate funding for

several agricultural programs, or has refused to release promised funds to certain agricultural agencies and programs.

The normal partisan budget debates, which have held up passage of previous budgets months past the annual June 30 deadline, were not as evident with the forming of the budget.

And, according to an Associated

Press report, this year's budget discussions eliminated participation of the majority House Democrats, who opposed the welfare cuts and business tax cuts.

According to the published report, Senate and House Republicans and House Republicans negotiated the budget with Gov. Casey

(Turn to Page A32)

### Bitlers Prepare For National Young Holstein Breeders Contest

VERNON ACHENBACH JR.

Lancaster Farming Staff

MOSELEM SPRINGS (Berks Co.)

— Vista-Grande Farm is a classic farmstead, with a big neighbor — the Deka battery recycling plant.

The farm is owned by David and Phoebe Bitler and as far as they are concerned, Deka has been a good neighbor, dissuading residential development, and testing their well water every six weeks for a long list of contaminants that they

expect will never show up.

The expensive testing is a requirement for the plant to operate, but it serves as a constant reassurance to the Bitlers that the Deka plant is living up to its role as an environment improving company.

In addition Deka provides 2,800 non-union jobs.

Area school kids know the farm. Phoebe encourages some school field trips to the family farm where she grew up, and she talks to the kids, explaining from where milk

comes, how its made, and she hands out coloring books along with white or chocolate milk.

Phoebe was the 1973 Berks County dairy princess. She has kept and honed public speaking

(Turn to Page A30)



Lancaster County Dairy Princess Amy Espenshade is flanked by family members, from left, Harvey, Susan, Becky, and Matthew. The Espenshades operate a Century Farm in Elizabethtown. Turn to page B2 to read more about Amy and the pageant. Photo by Lou Ann Good, staff writer.

### Six-County Group Considers Agribusiness Development

GAY BROWNLEE

Somerset Co. Correspondent

JOHNSTOWN (Cambria Co.)

— Maybe it boils down to the old maxim that one man's trash is another's treasure, but the impact of the state's eastern, urban sprawl on ag-related industry could be a bonus for the west central, six-county block known as the Southern Alleghenies.

Growing problems in the east include the heavy traffic, pollution and the usual citizen complaints.

What do Southern Alleghenies counties offer? Cambria, Bedford, Blair, Fulton, Huntingdon and Somerset counties are less urbanized, with space for innovative agribusiness ideas to flourish.

The fact that agriculture is the leading industry here, just as it is for the state, is a bonus. But can the right people be persuaded that their joint cooperation can create agribusiness growth? Besides his daily sweat and toil, will the farmer reap a good harvest from it?

These were topics discussed by a panel on agricultural economic development, held during Southern Alleghenies Planning and Development Commission's 28th annual conference, at the Market Street Holiday Inn in Johnstown.

Panelists were John Zerby, Purina Feeds; Scott Clemens, Hatfield Quality Meats; Evan Fine-man, Atlantic Dairy Cooperative; Christian Herr, State Dept. of Agriculture; Governor's Response Team, Carol Ployer, and Walt Fullam, Penn State.

Moderator was Donald Evans, assistant dean of Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences. He was introduced by Dick Rice, chairman of the Bedford County commissioners.

It was a discussion of importance to some 50 county government leaders, employment officials, bankers, Farm Credit officials, farmers and others.

Evans noted that in Pennsylvania (Turn to Page A23)