

Meeting Focus: Lancaster County Ag Future

EVERETT NEWSWANGER
Managing Editor

MANHEIM (Lancaster Co.)—The value of livestock, poultry, and the products sold from these enterprises puts Lancaster County third in the nation out of 3,100 counties for agricultural production.

Lancaster is first in eggs and pullets raised; fifth in hogs and pigs; sixth in dairy products; 26th in broilers; 69th in cattle, and 95th in turkeys. But the county is not even in the top 100 for total number of agricultural acres. Top counties in the nation have from 1 million to 800,000 ag acres, but Lancaster County has less than 400,000 acres of farmland.

With these facts, John Schwartz, Lancaster County extension agent, opened the monthly Ag Issues Forum breakfast Thursday morning. "We are in the top group of ag production counties in the nation," Schwartz said. "But sometimes we forget just how big our ag scene is here in Lancaster County."

The issue this month focused on the future of ag in the county. A panel of three farm experts started the discussion by expressing observations of the past and present to make "guesstimates" of future trends. Alan Bair, Atlantic Breeders, had dairy; Mark Price, Lanc. Poultry Assn. president, took poultry, and Gary Dean, Purina Mills, made observations about the hog industry. Then the meeting was opened for a free exchange of ideas from the 35 farm and ag industry leaders who were present.

Some of the observations were:

- History shows the people who settled here brought their knowledge of agriculture production with them, along with a good work ethic.

- We are close to population centers and thus close to markets, but this also brings land pressures and conflicts with neighbors. The people we want to sell to are also those who are telling us what we can and cannot do environmentally, in food safety, and in animal welfare. In addition, one farmer pointed out that the close markets help the processors and distribu-

tors of food but have little advantage to farmers because production agriculture does not share in the reduced costs.

- Soils, climate, and water support ag in this area, but nutrient management laws and water regulations put up blocks to free expansion of ag when larger herds and flocks may be needed for greater efficiency.

- The Amish play an important factor in the county ag community, providing a stabilizing force both in land pressures and fluctuation of cow numbers and production figures.

- Farmers are moving out of the county, but others are moving in, so the net change seems not to be as great as in other areas.

- The ag industry infra-structure plays an important role in keeping ag in Lancaster County. Both the need for and the supply of farm inputs such as feed, machinery, credit, and other farm services, provide advantages to the Lancaster County farm industry not found in other areas.

While many of the experts see farming as profitable in the past and the future, the present price

squeeze is especially hard and has everyone worried. Hogs that were once called "mortgage lifters" have been mortgage creators during the last six months. Farming must be profitable to keep it viable. We can no longer produce away our problems. We need a different approach to ag. Politically we need to be listening.

- The producer/farmer must become more than a hired person. We need to integrate the producer/farmer into the profit centers of the food chain.

The meeting adjourned at 9 a.m.

'Lion King' Topiaries Go On National Tour

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.)—How many college students with an interest in horticulture get to create giant topiaries of lions and water buffalo? Ronda Roemmelt, a senior majoring in agricultural sciences and minoring in horticulture in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences, got that chance last summer.

Roemmelt was one of 36 students chosen out of hundreds nationwide to participate in the horticulture internship program at Walt Disney World in Florida. She propagated and cared for tropical plants in the greenhouses and designed topiaries depicting characters from the film "The Lion King."

The topiaries are touring 10 major U.S. cities this winter, including Boston, Los Angeles, New York City and Chicago. "It's great, because my name is included in the display—these are

my topiaries," Roemmelt said.

Roemmelt's main project during her internship was looking for ways to improve how topiaries are constructed and maintained. "Before I did the internship, I had no idea how topiaries were put together," Roemmelt said. "An incredible amount of work goes into it."

"The kind of topiaries we constructed usually were metal frames covered with sphagnum moss and creeping fig," she said. "I experimented with different plants, such as sheet moss, which has a softer look—like fur. It looks more convincing when you're constructing lions and other animals."

Roemmelt also developed an internal irrigation system for the topiaries to keep the plants from drying out. "This is especially important for the smaller parts, like ears and paws," she said. "It's

almost like a circulatory system."

Roemmelt set up a drip irrigation system similar to the kind used for potted plants in greenhouses, where water is pumped through tubes to emitters, and volume and frequency are controlled by a timer. "Disney liked my idea, so we used it on all the new topiaries," Roemmelt said.

"We installed drip systems only on the upper half of the forms," she said. "Water from the emitters trickled down through the bottom half. We had to be careful not to use too much water, or the topiary would rot."

Roemmelt also got experience constructing landscaping for special events, such as Disney weddings and festivals. "For some events, we set up plants and mulched the area," Roemmelt said. "After the event, all these trees, shrubs and mulch had to be removed."

"Before I could help with these projects, I needed to learn all about Florida's native plants," she said. "They sent me around the grounds at Epcot Center with an identification book. I learned a tremendous amount about tropical plants."

Roemmelt believes the Disney internship was a turning point for her. "Before I took this internship, my horticulture courses were a lot of work. Now I have an understanding of plants that makes the textbook information very clear. The experience also has helped me in my job at a florist's shop, and I've been able to pick up some plant consulting work."

"I wasn't completely sure what I wanted to do after I graduated," Roemmelt said, "But after last summer, I'm sure of where I want to go in my career. I always want to work with plants—they're fun and they're always a challenge."

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