

Amy Espenshade Writes About Struggles And Successes Of American Farmers

Disasters, development, absence of a younger generation to replace the old, sky-rocketing land and equipment prices, hard-nosed environmentalists, livestock diseases — no wonder farmers have so much trouble doing their jobs today. As we see farmland acreage dwindling, fear rises for our country's future. Where will our food be grown without any land? We can't survive without food. Let us examine some of the challenges confronting farmers today and the methods by which they meet them.

More frequently today we see precious farmland being gobbled up by big-time developers. As a farmer from New Jersey once stated, "...if I sold this land and put the money in the bank, we'd make more just on interest. As the value of land grows, so does the pressure to sell." Banks and investors offer farmers "big-bucks" in return for their land and, sadly, too many farmers accept their proposals.

I live on a dairy farm and I can remember looking over the hill beyond our property line to a neighboring farm. Where rolling

hills once laid there now stands two housing developments, while construction on another development across the street fills the air with the sounds of rumbling bulldozers. Sometimes I feel isolated on my small farm and wonder if other families like mine will decide to keep their farms. Our farm has stayed in my family for over 125 years and we intend to keep it at least that many more!

Farmers also face the soaring costs of buildings, such as barns and silos, and necessary equipment like computer software and milking machinery. Jim Dickrell, a journalist for the Dairy Today magazine, published an article titled "Sticker Shock". In his article, Dickrell tallied up the cost of building a dairy farm to house 400 cows. The results were staggering. A 380 foot by 94 foot freestall barn, where the cows are free to walk around and feed as they wish, reaches a value of \$339,527. Two bunker silos, each 144 feet long, to hold haylage and silage (finely chopped hay and corn respectively), to feed the animals, costs \$75,782. Three thousand five hundred dollars (\$3500) bare-

ly covers the price of computers and software used to manage the herd and keep track of expenses and profit. We haven't even gotten the milk out of the cow yet! The milking machines along with a milk cooling and storage tank comes to about \$218,655! Of course, not everyone decides to build a 400 cow dairy every day, but a grand total of \$1,631,029 can empty a farmer's pocket mighty quickly.

Once a farmer has a barn, silos, and machinery in order, there still remains a problem of waste disposal. Phosphorus, a natural ele-

ment, happens to be found in livestock manure. You wouldn't think such a simple substance could cause so much controversy, but it has. You see, phosphorous flows along with eroded soil and finds its way into bodies of surface water such as lakes and streams where it becomes highly toxic to fish and other aquatic life. In recent years the Surface Water Improvement Act (SWIM) and the Coastal Zone Management Act have been harassing farmers to limit the amount of nitrogen, another byproduct in animal waste, they spread on fields as fer-


tilizer. Now that farmers have modified their farms to meet these standards, SWIM and the Coastal Act move in with even tougher restrictions on phosphorous. To comply with these regulations, average sized dairy farms with approximately 70 cows, will need to spend between \$73,000 and \$123,000 to limit erosion and build larger capacity manure storage tanks. The average farmer just doesn't have that kind of money.

I haven't even mentioned natural disasters, the lack of interest in the younger generation, hard-

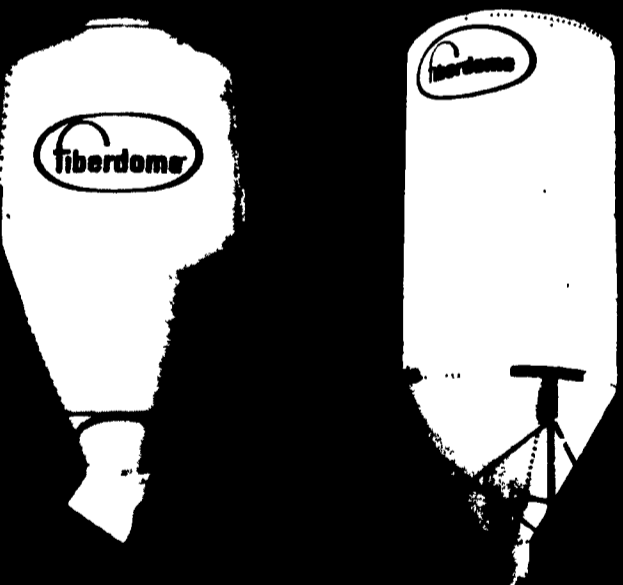
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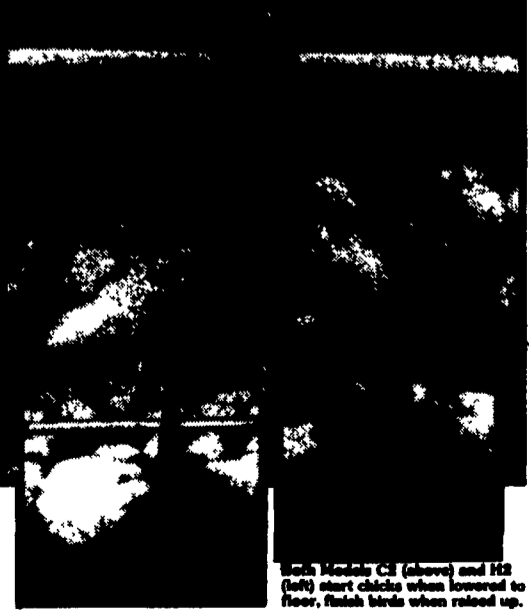


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