Farmers Demand Increased Flexibility

GRAND PASS, Mo.—This spring, Ryland Utlaut found himself in an increasingly familiar and quite unwelcome predicament. He was ready to plant, but a large portion of his ground was under water.

Utlaut and his brother, Fred, farm 3,500 acres. About half of it is upland. The other half borders the Missouri River.

Rich soils and hefty yields make that ground a blessing in most years, but once out of every 10 the land is prone to flooding. Lately, it's been two out of three.

Gary Marshall, executive director of the Missouri Corn Growers Association, said this year's flooding led to a crop insurance nightmare for many Missouri producers. Too wet to plant corn, they could have drilled beans. But if they did that, they would not have met prevented planting requirements, hence no crop insurance coverage. Luckily, through the hard work of NCGA and others, later rule changes corrected that situation.

Meanwhile, over in Kentucky, grower Terry Rhodes was patiently waiting in the Farms Service Agency (FSA) offices. Rhodes, of Whitesville, Ky., farms about 1,400 acres. Most of that is rented, and some lies in plots as small as 40 or 50 acres.

By the time Rhodes had completed the forms necessary for each plot, carefully measured each to ensure he did not overplant his corn base and OK'd everything with the officials, he had spent a good three to four days on logistics.

Like most farmers, Nebraska grower Lee Klein shared Rhodes's frustration with paperwork. He also found himself hitting the fields with what he knew was not the optimal planting strategy for his operation. Klein farms 1,000 acres of row crops near Battle Creek, Neb. Since he started farming in 1976, he's focused on economics. That led to corn after corn after corn on a large part of his ground.

Now Klein has an 850-acre corn base and faces a dilemma: Nematode problems mean he must use insecticides on his corn. He could control that naturally by rotating with soybeans. But if he does that, not only are beans less profitable than corn in his area of Nebraska, but he will lose base and collect less in deficiency payments. Deficiency payments are necessary for survival in Nebraska, where he has yet to meet anyone who has prospered farming outside of the program.

Three farmers, three different situations, but all with one need: increased planting flexibility.

"The way the program is set up, a portion of our crop is not covered with deficiency payments, and government is backing out of agriculture from a support standpoint," said Rod Gangwish, president of the National Corn Growers Association (NCGA). "If they're going to do that, we need some tradeoffs. One of the tradeoffs we feel we need—that farmers are demanding—is flexibility."

To date, one bill has been introduced in the House, The Freedom to Farm Act of 1995, HR2195, and one in the Senate, The Agricultural Competitiveness Act of 1995, S1155. Another contender is Sen. Tom Daschle's (D-SD) Targeted Marketing Loan program. All call for increased planting flexibility. However, there is a difference in the amount of flexibility allowed. NCGA has proposed Full Farm Flexibility, a program that combines bases and allows full production on those acres.

"I think there's probably good in a number of the proposals, recognizing that not any one proposal will be adopted in its entirety," said Todd Barlow, executive director of the Kentucky Corn Growers Association. "There are a lot of questions that need to be asked about these proposals, but I think they are all going in the direction of flexibility. We lean toward Full Farm Flexibility because it takes us where we want to go. The others don't go far enough."

Increased flexibility would help farmers on a number of fronts, these farmers say. First, it would allow them to farm for the market—and a fickle Mother Nature—rather than government rules. From a production standpoint, they could utilize proper rotations. That would boost yields, cut production costs and help the environment as they applied fewer chemicals and fertilizers.

With increased flexibility, soil erosion could be further decreased. "Years ago we actually had an erosion problem if we raised soybeans because we didn't know how to farm like we do now. The soybean stubble ground would tend to blow away because we didn't handle residue like we do today," Klein said. "Now we till less. Part of that is due to the different herbicides we have today. The other is if we plant soybeans now we'll come in with rye for a cover crop in the fall and plant corn in standing rye the next year. More flexibility would give us even better options."

Crop insurance problems could also be alleviated. By removing the acreage constraints present in today's system, farmers could react to the weather and plant more crops in a timely fashion. "Under past scenarios you have been required to plant one thing for crop insurance purposes, one thing for farm programs and another from a rotational standpoint for crop residue purposes," Marshall said. "Full flexibility would allow those plans to be much simpler and allow greater combinations of them."

And as for those long waits at the FSA office, those would disappear, too. Farmers would simply have to tell the agency where and how much of each crop they planted. The rigorous guidelines could be a thing of the past.

"In farming we use a myriad of different tools to raise our crops," said LaMoine Smith, a grower from Minden, Neb. "When you put these things together, like the options program, federal crop insurance and flexibility, you have a total program. When you leave one of the links out, it's just like a chain. Wherever the weak link is, it breaks. If we don't get flexibility in this farm bill, the other aspects aren't going to be very important to us."

CORN TALK NEWS

PENNSYLVANIA MASTER CORN GROWERS ASSOC., INC.

Something New For Mid-Atlantic Tillage Conference

Lynn Hoffman
Penn State
Agronomy Department

The 1995 Mid-Atlantic Tillage Conference will be presented this year in a new format: a satellite video conference.

The conference, long a popular draw for farmers and agricultural professionals, will be held two evenings — Dec. 6 and Dec. 13 from 7 p.m. till 9 p.m.

One evening will emphasize the equipment side of conservation tillage, including items such as planting and planter adjustments and maintenance, row cleaners, soil compaction, and other timely topics. The other evening will emphasize fundamental principles and issues of conservation tillage.

Emphasis will be given to new pesticides, no-till pasture renovation, high residue and plant disease interactions, and no-till small grains.

This is a major change in format for this conference. It should make the conference more accessible to a wide geographical area within the mid-Atlantic region.

It will utilize speakers from Ohio, Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia and Pennsylvania with expertise in these areas. There will be an opportunity for live response to questions by all the speakers involved, even though some will be broadcasting from their home state.

An additional plus to this format will be the availability of the tapes from these programs for future use.

Contact local extension offices for information on attending the meeting locally or call the agronomy department (814) 865-2543) for the the satellite information if you wish to view it at home.

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