

Economist: Chinese Ag Trade Not A Sure Thing

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Midwestern farmers shouldn't bet their mortgages that China will become a big buyer of U.S. farm products, at least not quite yet, said an Ohio State University agricultural economist.

According to Allan Lines, China's leaders intend for that country to become self-sufficient in food production, rather than become a long-term player in international markets. China's leaders consider its recent purchases of U.S. grains to be a temporary phase to meet short-term shortages, he said.

However, China's road to self-sufficiency could result in considerable environmental damage if marginal lands are brought into production, Lines said. He thinks China would be better off relying on the world's grain markets, rather than trying to expand crops into fragile ecosystems.

"Farmers should be cautious and wary," Lines said. "Take advantage of short-term opportunities, but be careful about making strategic plans based on the idea that the U.S. will become the breadbasket for China."

Lines came to those conclusions after a visit this summer to the world's most populous nation. The Chinese Academy of Sciences invited a team of seven OSU

researchers to study China's prospects for sustainable agricultural growth. The team logged 1,500 miles visiting rural areas and consulted with Chinese scholars.

The trip opened Line's eyes to China's great strides in improving agricultural production since the Communist-ruled government abandoned collectivization more than 15 years ago. However, farmers have probably maximized their output from the existing land base, Lines said.

For example, additional applications of synthetic fertilizers would not increase yields that much, Lines said. Since 1981, farmers have at least doubled nitrogen and phosphorous use, and have nearly tripled potash use, according to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization, as cited by Lines.

Farmers have also maximized use of subsurface, ground water and impoundment sources for irrigation, Lines said. China's growing industrial and consumer sectors are also pressuring water resources, he said.

As a result, China is looking to expand crop production to high, cool, drier areas, such as the Tibe-

tan Plateau, Inner Mongolian Plateau and Manchurian valleys, Lines said. China would have to impound surface waters to develop massive irrigation systems to water these areas, he said.

"If you start putting a plow to these extensive grasslands, you create wind erosion and soil erosion problems," Lines said.

China's food needs are being driven by an expanding economy that is putting more money in the hands of consumers, Lines said. Consumers are using their higher incomes to buy more meat, which is putting pressure on feedgrains production.

"As their income increases, they want to eat better, so they change their diet," Lines said. "They want to eat more and use more edible oils."

Lines recommended that China integrate its food production system and internal food demand with the world markets. That would mean business for the world's farmers who crop less fragile environments, such as the Midwest.

However, Midwestern farmers wouldn't necessarily reap a windfall, Lines said. Competitors

include grain farmers in Central and Eastern Europe, South American, Australia and Africa, he said.

Nevertheless, the United States' new farm policy puts Midwestern farmers in good shape to respond to any changes in the world markets, Lines said. Looming in the balance is what China will do if its

food demand outstrips its ability to produce.

"It's very difficult to say what is going to happen in China," Lines said. "You have to realize it's a centrally planned, Communist state that is reluctant to turn loose and let the market economy grow as fast as it will grow."

Greenhouse Seminar Set

WILKES-BARRE (Luzerne Co.) — The Northeast Greenhouse Seminar will be held Wednesday, Nov. 12, at the Luzerne County Community College Conference Center in Nanticoke. The day's program will begin with registration at 8:30 a.m. and will conclude at 3:15 p.m.

Highlighting this year's program are Mark Adams of Mark Adams Greenhouses — "The Art of Growing Perennials;" Gary Moorman, Penn State — "Disease and Virus Control;" Karl Valley, Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture — "Insect Pests and their Control;" Mike Murphy, Mine Safety Appliances — "Personal Protection Equipment;" David

Pieczarka, BioWorks, Inc. — "T-22 Trackademia;" and Jim Garrahan of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture — "What's New in Pesticide Regulations."

To see what's new in the industry, visit the commercial exhibitors who will have displays set up exhibiting their company's products.

The deadline to register is Oct. 31. Cost for the day is \$12 per person which includes coffee, donuts, and lunch. For more information and/or a registration form, contact your local county extension office or the Luzerne County Cooperative Extension Office at (717) 825-1701.

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