Survey Examines Farm Computer Use

Those are some of the ways that local farmers use computers to improve farm viability and profitability. And while the technology continues to evolve, one reason for the purchase of a computer is clear: improved management of the farm.

Almost a dozen computer users and those interested in purchasing a computer attended a demonstration provided by Tony Talarigo, owner of Tony's Electronics, Bernville, recently at Tulpehocken High School.

While Talarigo provided insight into the inner workings of computers — helping to explain how they work — *Lancaster Farming* provided a survey of questions to members of the Tulpehocken Adult Young Farmers Association.

Lancaster Farming spoke to several of the members about the use of computers and the farm. The survey included 10 questions that covered a variety of topics.

Lancaster Farming addressed the questions to William and Lolly Lesher, Bernville; Donna and Jim Dietrich, Hamburg; Pat and Dennis Bross, Myerstown; and Denise Stump, Stumpland Farm, Bernville.

They are dairy and crop farmers from throughout Berks County and provided some insights into how they use computers and what they plan to do to improve their use.

1. What computers do you use, and how?

William Lesher: We use a Swan 486 system with the following software: business financial accounting with Quicken. We use Lotus and WordPerfect for various things in our dairy store and dairy farm. We also use a Packard Bell system for Lolly's consulting business which goes with her on the road. We also have a nutrition program built into it.

Donna Dietrich: We use a Gateway 2000 486DX50.

Pat and Dennis Bross: We use a Packard Bell Legend 2000.

Denise Stump: We use a Pentium-based computer.

2. What software do you use, and how?

William Lesher: For our nutrition work, we use a dairy nutrition program called Spartan from Michigan State University. We use Quicken for our business financial records and payroll. We uses Lotus for spreadsheet work and a word processing program, WordPerfect, for signs, letters, etc.

Donna Dietrich: Our Windows 95 system is used by my husband, Jim, who sells seed corn for Pioneer Company. Recently we are checking into purchasing Farm Works for field mapping, yields, and crop record keeping.

Pat and Dennis Bross: We use a Windows 95 program that contains Quickbooks, a banking program, S.A.T., the Encarta Encyclopedia, P.C. Bible Study, and Math Blaster.

Denise Stump: We use Easy, FACCTS, PC Dart (a program from the Raleigh DHIA), and Field Map.

3. Why did you decide to use a computer at your farm?

William Lesher: Lolly learned to use the computer in college. In her first job out of school, when we went into partnership with my parents, we decided to put the financial part of the business on the computer.

Donna Dietrich: We decided to use the computer for the seed corn business and for our financial records.

Pat and Dennis Bross: I wanted to cut down on my paperwork.

4. How, exactly, has your computer helped you improve farm efficiency and profitability?

Lolly Lesher: It has made recordkeeping easier, more organized, and the data more accessible. Information is the key to management. Our computer helps us retrieve, organize, and understand data quickly and in a variety of forms.

Donna Dietrich: Our computers and recording are more accurate.

Pat and Dennis Bross: So far, it hasn't!

Denise Stump: We just got it.

5. Do you use the Internet? If so, how?

Lolly Lesher: Not yet. But we look forward to getting on Dairy-L.

(*Editor's Note: Dairy-L is a "user's forum" where dairy farmers and industry representatives can share information about all aspects of dairy farming, available on the Internet.*)

Donna Dietrich: No.

Pat and Dennis Bross: Yes. We use it for school reports, farm information, and communication with family overseas.

Denise Stump: No.

6. What about the Internet, if you use it, do you use to improve farm efficiency and profitability?

(*Editor's Note: This question was answered previously by several computer users.*)

Pat and Dennis Bross: The Internet provides easy access to articles from Dairy-L and other magazines. It allows us to correspond with our feed management consultant.

7. What are some other things you and your family uses the computer for?

William Lesher: Lolly uses the laptop computer for her public relations business. It provides a great source for information and allows her to operate her database system.

Donna Dietrich: Our children use it for games. The CD Rom equipment is used for music.

Pat and Dennis Bross: Our oldest daughter uses it for reports and homework. The younger children play educational games on it. We use it to keep in touch with family and friends and we do our banking from home.

8. What about computers in general do you find difficult or frustrating?

Lolly Lesher: It is easy to get frustrated using computers because we use what we have learned to do. Knowing it can do more but learning how is tough. Not using the computer to its full potential is expensive and frustrating.

Donna Dietrich: (I find it difficult) basically understanding the whole system.

Pat and Dennis Bross: The hardest is trying to make sure the software and computer work together.

Denise Stump: The hardest thing probably will be learning how to use everything, but there are plenty of people willing to give tips. Also it's frustrating when someone is scared to use it because they're "afraid" they might mess it up.

9. What about the Internet do you find difficult or frustrating?

(*Editor's Note: This question went unanswered by the survey participants.*)

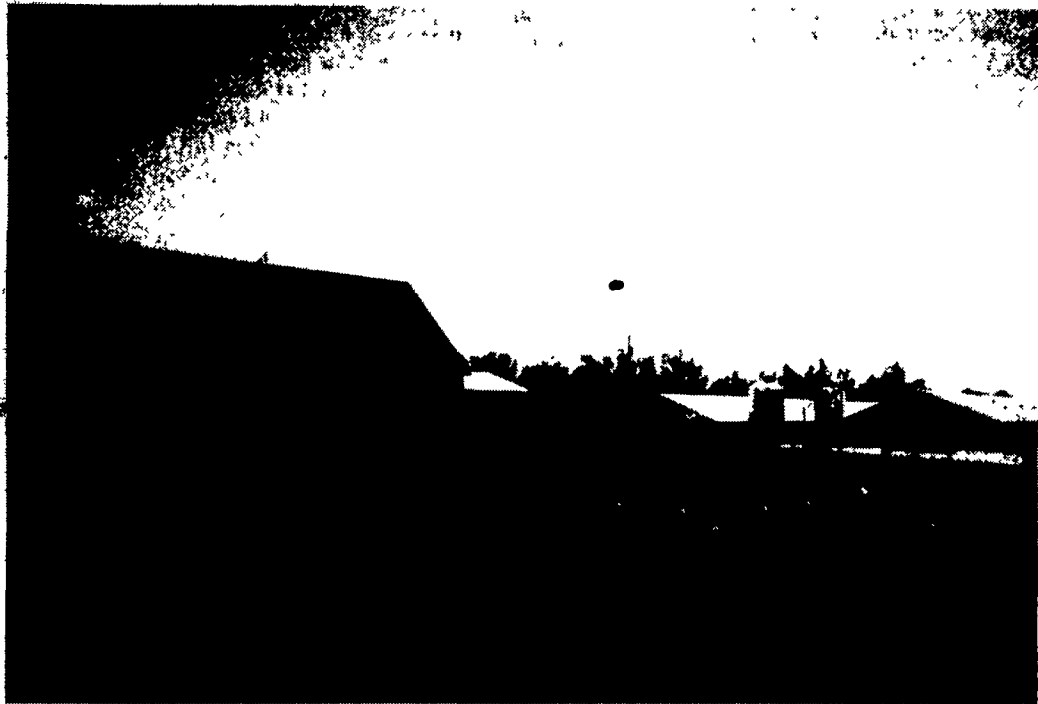**10. How has the Internet helped your farming operation in ways that you hadn't foreseen?**

(*Editor's Note: This question also went unanswered.*)

Apparently, for many respondents, the Internet is a new and untested area, particularly for many aspects of the farm.

Overall, many participated in one of several general meetings recently to learn more about the inner workings of computers. They believed they needed more direction about how to make more use of the system.

In the case of Denise Stump, Stumpland Farm in Bernville, she noted, "We just got ours and haven't managed to do much with it yet."

At the meeting, the participants agreed that using the computer has helped them in their business but there was still plenty to learn.