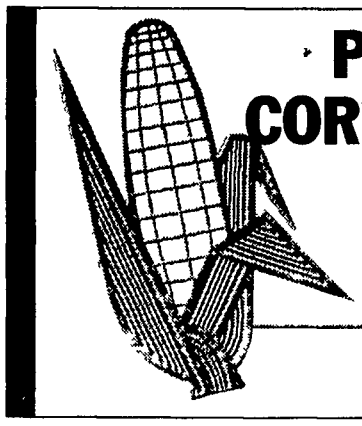

PENNSYLVANIA MASTER CORN GROWERS ASSOCIATION

Between The Rows

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WINTER MEETINGS BRING NEW IDEAS

Winter crop meetings can be more than just an exercise to get pesticide credits — and my experience this year suggests that you can often come away with some beneficial ideas.

I get to attend more meetings than the average person and often end up being on the program, but that doesn't mean I don't learn a few things along the way.

This year I picked up a number of good ideas. I thought I'd share a few of those ideas in this column.

One issue that I encountered was on using corn for grazing. You may recall the article published in the last ***Corn Talk*** on the demonstration conducted in Berks County last year. One concern I have had with the grazing corn idea is how can we reduce the costs of establishing the corn so that the feed production cost is comparable to other warm season annual grasses?

At the recent PASA (Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture) conference I attended a session conducted by Bradford County dairy farmer Kim Seeley. They too had a good experience with using corn as a grazing crop. They planted corn into a 3-acre sacrifice paddock in their rotational grazing scheme where the cows had torn up the existing sod and manured the ground well in early spring. Then Kim came in and worked up the field and planted corn. He cultivated this piece to control weeds. He didn't get complete weed control but the cows cleaned up the weeds with the corn when the field was grazed. They ended up grazing the field in August and early September with the milking herd for 41 days.

They used no herbicide, fertilizer, or insecticide and a long-season corn hybrid for their area. This was the same time when corn silage was very expensive and grass was short around the state. They figured their out-of-pocket costs to produce a ton of dry matter were $9 per ton.

In mid-September, just as the cows were finishing up the field, they broadcasted rye in the stubble and ended up with a decent cover crop as well.

Another issue brought to my attention at one meeting was that of apomixis. You may ask what is apomixis and what does it have to do with me? Well, according to an article in The Economist recently, a group of American and Russian researchers received a patent for an apomictic corn plant. Apomictic plants reproduce asexually — unlike most plants, which produce sexually. Having aptomictic corn could, in the long run, do away with the costly process of hybrid seed production and simplify the breeding program. The end results could be cheaper and better hybrids. On the other hand it might also be possible to save seed from apomictic corn and replant your own seed, which has some pros and cons associated with it. It is still unknown what the potential of these plants are but scientists are studying the genetics of the apomixis to see if it can be incorporated into modern and productive corn lines.

Another interesting session I attended this winter was also at the PASA conference. There the topic was organic grain production and marketing. According to one Midwest grain analyst, overseas concerns over genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is strengthening the market for organically produced soybeans and corn, since this is one way foreign buyers can assure themselves that no GMOs are in their grain. He also suggested that premiums on organic grain would depend on the supply and with a greater supply, premiums would decrease.

On the production side, Rodale agronomist Jeff Moyer and John Hall from the Michael Fields Institute in Wisconsin both discussed how they have been using a corn-soybean-wheat/clover rotation to produce organic grain. They are generally using tillage and cultivation or rotary hoeing for weed control, no insecticides, and manure and legume N credits to help meet or supplement their nutrient requirements. John Hall noted that one of the challenges of this rotation has been a buildup of weed seeds from annual grasses that germinate in the wheat stubble. At the Fields Institute they developed a "chem lite" approach which relies on herbicides to control these weeds or to occasionally apply rescue treatment to the corn or beans where a weed problem comes through the mechanical control.

I encountered another interesting phenomenon at some of our extension meetings this winter. That was the attitude of various grain merchants to specialty corn, especially the high oil corn. Whereas in the past the grain industry has generally been reluctant to support this idea because of the need for separation and testing, now it seems as if the idea is gaining support.

These were just a few of the interesting ideas I encountered that come to mind. I was also able to visit with many corn growers around the state and renew our friendships and compare notes on the season. So for me, the winter meetings were much more than just a way to receive pesticide credits and I hope they were that way for you as well.