

Some View Past Year As One Of Opportunity; For Others, It Was 1999 Nightmare

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cane named Floyd in September.

Drought Of '99

By far the biggest story was the worst drought in the history of the state, rivaling that of 1964 or 1955.

In mid-June, Gov. Tom Ridge declared a "drought warning" for more than two-thirds of the state. The warning, second of a three-tiered drought response, called for a 10 percent voluntary reduction in water consumption.

When producers thought the worst was over, and some small regions in the northcentral and northwestern part of the state received rain, others saw corn and soybeans emerge, wither, and die.

The July 24 *Lancaster Farming* reported that a "drought emergency" had been declared. The third and most severe stage mandates restrictions on water use.

The drought was how producers paid the price for little snow over the winter, little rain the spring, and a dry, hot summer. This resulted in dangerous low groundwater levels. Some producers, dependent on irrigation, had to turn off the pumps to conserve water for livestock. Shallow wells dried up.

Pastures dried up, too. By late August, truckloads of hay from Michigan, Wisconsin, Kansas, and Ontario made their way to the drought-stricken states in the Northeast. FFA chapters and other organizations donated their time to help unload hay. The Mennonite Disaster Service initiated a hay

drive late in August after some farmers in Michigan offered their bumper crop of hay to needy farmers in the East.

Even as late as December, corn was arriving from Canada to area producers. Silage harvest yields were way down. Many farmers simply disced their corn grain fields. As a result, volunteer corn — on ears too small to be picked up by the combine — will pose a risk in some fields in 2000.

In 1999, the state Department of Environmental Protection was cautioning everyone statewide to do their part to conserve water. Some townships declared mandatory restrictions — including water rationing.

In Lancaster County, three consecutive 100-degree days were recorded, with more than half dozen days total. For many counties in the southeastern part of the state, there was no rain in the crucial months of June and July — when corn and soybeans need it most.

As a result, in early August, President Clinton declared West Virginia and four contiguous counties in southwestern Pennsylvania a federal disaster area.

Prior to recessing, the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed a \$65.6 million drought relief bill for producers. Earlier on, many producer organizations were disquieted about a proposed low-interest loan program to aid in the drought relief; but at the requests of senators and representatives, who realized producers do not

need to carry on additional debt, the relief bill earmarks \$60 million in grants to help farmers recoup 1999 crop losses and \$5.6 million in crop insurance incentives for this year. The state money com-

bines with an estimated \$75 million in federal aid, bringing the total for drought relief in Pennsylvania to \$135 million.

The aid program is available to farmers who can document a crop

loss of more than 35 percent. Deadline to apply is Feb. 25. Farmers who want aid must apply in person at the county branches of the USDA Farm Service Agency.

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Pennsylvania Produce Is Simply Delicious. To educate the public about fruit and vegetable production in the state, a campaign has been coordinated through the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture with the state food merchants and individual retailers and marketers. From left, Food Merchants President David McCorkle, Wels Markets President Norman Rich, State Agriculture Secretary Samuel Hayes Jr., potato producer Keith Masser, and green bean grower Ronald Copenhaver.



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