

De-Mechanization?

Natural Farm Impossible

By Ferdie J. Deering

This is the week to summarize developments on several topics.

A 400-mile swing by car through western Oklahoma turned up hardly a farm where it didn't look like the operator was ahead of schedule on his work. The country looks better than ever, with new homes going up here and there.

Wheat fields are plowed and ready to be seeded, mostly about six to eight weeks from now. Small fields in fence corners and along creeks that might have been left fallow in years past are ready, and a few small pastures have been prepared for sowing.

Look for a bigger wheat acreage to be seeded this fall, unless government and labor unions discourage farmers too much.

Last spring this column told how DeKalb plans to help farmers grow their own hybrid wheat seed by selling them foundation stock for seed use and sell the surplus to neighbors or dealers.

Dwight Glenn DeKalb's wheat development manager, estimates that as much as 50,000 acres will be planted to hybrid wheat in Oklahoma this fall. Glenn says DeKalb and other companies may sell enough seed to plant 125,000 acres for 1976 harvest and probably four times that much for the 1977 crop.

Agriculture is a big user of energy, including gasoline for cars, pickups and trucks, diesel fuel for tractors and other off-highway vehicles, electricity for lights, motors and pumps, petroleum to manufacture chemicals for insect and disease control and for making fertilizers, and LPG for heating, crop drying, processing and other purposes.

Researchers have related this energy consumed to energy produced as food or feed, sometimes implying that farmers ought to use less and leave more for urban consumers.

Nobody has suggested seriously that we ought to go back to horsepower for farming, but the U.S. Department of Agriculture has the answer ready anyway. Earle E. Gavett of the Economic Research Service's Natural Resource Economics Division says such a move would be "biologically impossible and sociologically impractical."

Gavett says we'd need 61 million horses and mules to make the switch, compared to 3 million we now have. It would be biologically impossible to increase numbers that much before 1992.

In order to feed 61 million horses

and mules, we would have to divert 180 million acres of prime farmland from growing food for people to growing feed for animals. That's half of the total we now have in crops.

It would take more labor to do our farm work with animals. Our present work force of 4 million farm workers would have to be increased to 31 million, and a lot of work wouldn't be done on time. This could result in lower quality or less yields.

With minimum wages in effect, de-mechanized farming would result in higher costs, too. And there would be heaps of manure to be disposed of. We don't know what to do with all the fertilizer from cattle feedlots now.

Predictions that farm land values would level off have not materialized. Farmers want more in order to get better utilization of their equipment, and city folks are buying for homes, factories or other purposes with little regard for agricultural values.

A business man called to ask how many people live in the country in Oklahoma, but do not farm. Reliable statistics are not available, but it is plain to experienced observers that they may outnumber farmers. Many actual farmers now live in town.

Oklahoma farm real estate values (farm land and buildings) increased in value an average of 16 per cent between March 1, 1974, and March 1, 1975. Average value per acre rose from \$275 to \$318. Number of sales declined.

The national average value went up 14 per cent, increasing from \$310 to \$354 per acre. The USDA Statistical Reporting Service says that farm real estate market activity "is expected to slow significantly during the year ending March 1, 1976, and market price changes are expected to average between a minus 5 and a plus 5 per cent."

Fiber board, particle board and pulp for paper now consume large amounts of timber, so a new forestry machine developed in Sweden may show up here one of these days. By exerting several tons of force on coniferous trees (including pine) the machine pulls up the trees by the roots, which are then lopped off and used along with the stumps.

The report says that the volume of wood yielded is increased by 30 per cent over felling. It has a capacity of 60 trees per hour, but what would it do to the land?