

Policy Pennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

Changes in Iowa farms

For the past several weeks I have been working on a lecture that I will be giving in March. Part of that lecture focuses in on the changes that have taken place in agriculture since I left the Hamilton County, Iowa farm I was raised on and went to Iowa State.

When I was home years ago, we used a corn-soybeans-corn-oats-hay rotation. We bought 450 pound calves, grew them up on oats, silage and timber pasture and fattened them with corn and supplement. We farrowed-to-finished hogs twice a year and chicks that were started in the brooder house in the dead of winter progressed to the laying house the following fall. The oats were also fed to the sows and two horses. The oat straw became hog and cattle bedding.

Today the face of agriculture is quite different. Consolidation and specialization have happened not only in agribusiness but on the farm as well. A large number of farmers have been more than happy to clear out the livestock, tear down the fences and specialize in crop agriculture, while others have concentrated their efforts in animal agriculture.

A comparison of Hamilton County in 1959 with the way it was in 1997 is revealing. When I left for college there were 1,902 farms in the county with an average size of 191 acres. Today that number stands at 790 farms and the average size has increased to 441 acres. The total numbers of acres in farmland has decreased slightly while the crop acres have increased a little.

But look at the change in the use of those acres. The 1959 data confirms my recollection of how we farmed. The bulk of the acres (174,000) were planted to corn with soybeans and oats coming in at about 50,000 acres. Hay trailed with half those acres. Today there are two crops grown in my home county: corn and soybeans, with corn about 15,000 acres ahead of soybeans. Acres devoted to oats are negligible and hay is less than 3,000 acres.

Those numbers mean that some of the ground is farmed with corn following in on corn, an impossibility when I

was growing up. If we had tried that when I was growing up, the root worms would have mowed the corn down after the first year. Insecticides and seed improvements have taken care of that problem.

In 1959 over 60% of the farms had poultry, selling 2.5 million dozen eggs and 166,000 chickens. As I remember it, that chicken and egg money often came in very handy. Today there are just 31 farms in the county with any kind of poultry and my guess is that half of that number are farms where the poultry is being raised for 4-H and FFA demonstration projects. The production level today for eggs and poultry is not published because there are so few producers that to publish the information would reveal proprietary information.

The biggest change in animal agriculture has come in hog production. When I was growing up, those 1,308 farms that had hogs had an average of 120 animals at any one time. Today the 159 hog producers have an average of 2,820 animals at any one time. In my youth hogs were part of a diversified farming operation. Today they are the object of a specialty production system.

While nearly 90% of the farms in 1959 had some form of livestock on them, today that number probably hovers around 35-40%. In the past farmers protected themselves through diversification. Usually, when crop prices were in the tank, hogs or cattle were up and vice versa. Today the story is quite different. With less diversification, swings in crop and animal prices can significantly affect the producer's bottom line.

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