

## **FARMING NOTES – OCTOBER 2013**

**Uncertainty** – As we and global markets have been watching the playing out of the battle in Washington over the debt ceiling and Affordable Health Care Act, farmers have been waiting for the Farm Bill to be passed for over a year. There seems to be some agreement that the two sides will be able to come together sufficiently to ensure that farmers can at last plan for the coming year with certainty and that our food aid programs will not be restricted as severely as had been proposed.

According to the USDA, 14.5 percent of U.S. households were food insecure in 2012 and 5.7 percent of U.S. households fall into the most severe category of food insecurity. Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly referred to as food stamps, and other nutrition-related programs accounted for 80 percent of the Farm Bill spending in 2010.

Farmers must know details of the proposed Farm Bill, normally 33% of the total which supports the notoriously weather-dependent and cyclical farming community responsible for producing our food and employing 13% of the civilian workforce.

Let us hope that our legislators can come together and agree what is best for the country – the less fortunate in our towns and rural areas and our vital farming industry. We know that e-mails and writing letters to our Congressmen and Senators do get their attention and are effective.

**Workforce** – Immigration reform is another issue. The California Farm Bureau has estimated that 80,000 acres of fresh produce used to be grown in California but has moved to other countries. They estimate thousands of farms could fail and farm income could drop by \$5-9 billion without immigration reform.

70 organizations have come together to form the Agricultural Workforce Coalition (AWC) to agree on a plan to meet the labor needs of agriculture both now and in the future. Their proposal, "the Agricultural Worker Visa Program, will ensure agriculture's future legal workforce. This new program offers both employer and employee choice and flexibility through two different work options: an "At-Will" visa and a Contract visa. These three-year visas would be valid for employment with agriculture employers registered through the USDA and are separate from the low-skilled visas for the general business community."

Our local farming operations are also affected by challenges in getting labor for the mushroom industry, our dairies, landscape maintenance and equine farms. Increased mechanization and automation can help field crops but is more difficult with hand-harvested and high labor fruit and vegetable crops, including mushrooms. Producers are looking for less labor intensive crops which will only increase imports of produce – already we are importing more vegetables than we are exporting, although our fruit exports and imports have been about the same. In 2012 we imported 2.9x the value of fresh

vegetables we imported in 2000 and 2.6x for fresh fruit. While the locally grown produce is increasing, the strong growth in the volume and variety of fresh produce imports has allowed U.S. consumers to eat more fruit and vegetables and enjoy year-round access to fresh produce they would otherwise not have. As we get more health conscious, both trends likely to grow more local and more imports particularly for seasonal demand.

**Larger farms** – The 2012 Ag Census results will eventually get published and analyzed but a recent analysis of the most recent 2007 Ag Census indicated that 96% of U.S. crop production is carried out by family farms which accounted for 87% of the total crop value in 2011. The trend to larger farms has continued even though the mean farm size has changed little. There have been a growing number of very small farms while consolidation has resulted in the greater number of larger farms at the expense of mid-size farms. Shifts are considered to be due to technology, farm equipment costs, concentration of field crops in the most suitable areas with larger and contiguous fields and less labor required due to equipment and GM traits amongst other factors.

We are fortunate in Chester County to have a local large affluent population to provide many opportunities for small and part time farmers to provide a wide range of higher value farm products such as produce, wine, artisan cheese and equine and agri-tourism opportunities.

**Climate change and incidence of crop pests, diseases and weeds** – We know that the U.S Department of Agriculture has been revising the zones which are suitable for growing plants and are adjusting northwards its map of zones suitable for growing certain crops. A global survey has been collecting information from around the world for over one hundred years. Researchers found that 612 organisms from viruses, fungal pathogens and bacteria to beetles and Lepidoptera had shifted towards the poles at an average rate of about 3 kilometers per year since 1960. Researcher's conclusion "As new species of pests and diseases evolve and potentially the environment for them becomes more amenable at higher latitudes, the pressure on the breadbaskets of the world is going to increase." Purdue University scientist "I think a lot of these papers are all pointing in the same direction, they are all saying OK we should care about climate change. We should do something other than zero."

**Loss of farmland and land use orientation** - The South East of Pennsylvania lost 231,691 acres of farmland to urban development during the period 1992-2005. This was the highest percentage movement of all PA regions – 24.4% during this period. Our region also lost 200,627 acres of forest to urban development over this 13 year time span which was by far the highest loss of forest land to urban in the Commonwealth. By contrast the Northern Tier witnessed a major loss of farmland to forestry.

**Food Waste** - The food wasted in the supply chain could feed as many as two billion people without any additional impact on the environment. FAO.