

Learning from the Amish tragedy

Food for Thought

WHEN tragedy befalls us, the first question that comes to mind is "Why?!" We naturally want to find someone or something to blame. Even my friends in the Plain community suffered with it as they mourned over early October's schoolhouse massacre in once-peaceful Nickel Mines, Pa.

What possible good could come out of Charles Roberts' slaughter of innocent children? Perhaps several things:

In the aftermath, the Old Order Amish community demonstrated three invaluable virtues that are exceedingly rare in today's world. Their acceptance that this, too, could be part of God's greater plan astounded even the news media.

By example, they've shown the awesome potential of quiet forbearance,



John Vogel
EDITOR
Jvogel@farmprogress.com

forgiveness and compassion — even for Roberts' family.

The world was stunned by their outreach to Roberts' family. The news media widely reported on it. We all would benefit from affirming and practicing those virtues and teaching them to our future generations. America's future depends on it.

As we went to press, five surviving girls were still in medical care. The Amish set up two funds for contributions: One is the Nickel Mines Children's Fund; the other, Roberts Family Fund. Both can be sent to the Coatsville Saving Bank, 1082 Georgetown Rd., Paradise, PA 17562.

Still more hay rolls to Texas

Just one week after November's "Twice-blessed hay rolls clear to Texas" story landed in farm mailboxes, Ken Winebark,

ag operations manager for Mercy Ships International in East Texas, e-mailed me with good news: "The third load of hay has arrived [from Pennsylvania]. And Elvin [Gingrich] tells me he's having trouble turning the hay off.

"Looks like we'll be getting a fifth load. God is so good!" concludes this thanks-filled man.

rBST uproar: Ply your leverage!

This fall, Dean Foods and H.P. Hood began pressuring dairy co-ops to guarantee that milk shipped to them isn't produced by cows treated with Posilac. Now, many producers are being pushed to sign rBST-free contracts.

Cutting through a barn full of sideline controversies, it's a business decision — one that every milk producer should leverage to the hilt! If your co-op wants you to commit, make the co-op pay for it. Even if you don't use Posilac, don't commit without a guarantee of a specified premium.

After all, you're promising to

give up a technology that has value — an "opportunity cost." Don't just give it away.

Don't rip Monsanto for talking about a 10-pound herd average advantage worth a 78-cent premium. Yes, 10 pounds may be a "stretch." But it's a strong talking point for negotiating a premium value. Use it!

Our Vermont dairy columnist, Vicky Carson, adds: "At the very least, you shouldn't be paying extra hauling for that milk!"

Fess up when ya mess up

On page 29 of November's issue, we ran a story about annuities. The article noted that index annuity gains are taxed as capital gains. In fact, all gains above the principal invested in an annuity are taxed as ordinary income. We regret the error.



BITE-SIZED MORSEL

Count your blessings. They'll almost always outweigh your woes.

See more on page 21.

Looking forward to Farm Bill 2007

By WILLIE VOGT



THE elections are over, the results known and no matter who controls the House and Senate for the next Congress, farmers should keep one thing in mind: The 2007 Farm Bill looms ahead.

Last time around, the farm-bill debate ended with a compromise that had most groups happy. But four years of Environmental Working Group information, the constant hammering on farm programs by other groups unaware of the true economics of agriculture and a popular press that's more focused on Lindsay Lohan's latest date may bring a changed legislative environment.

The debate on the 2007 Farm Bill could be the most contentious in years. The Bush administration, through Ag Secretary Mike Johanns, has done a good job of delivering the message that

Key Points

- Food-versus-fuel debate will impact the 2007 Farm Bill.
- The popular media works against renewable fuels.
- Keep in touch with Congress and urge representatives to action.

the old bill will not be extended as a "new" bill. For groups with the most to lose, the fight for payments and keeping payment limits at bay remains the biggest challenge; and this 2007 Farm Bill may come out of the debate with less change than we predict.

Johanns has taken a different approach to this farm-bill creation effort. With 50 farm-bill listening sessions around the country — 22 of which the secretary sat in on — farmers, ranchers and other interested parties had their say. Transcripts of all those sessions were made available to the public.

USDA also prepared briefing papers on key topics from those events from

rural development to conservation. This may be the most thorough homework any administration has ever done in advance of major legislation. Yet there are forces at work that could bring more controversy to the debate.

Public opinion shift?

The public may be less receptive to farmers than in the past. When farmers were perceived as producers of food, there was always the "everybody's got to eat" message. Today, when a lot of what you raise may be turned into fuel, or carpet, or plastic, does the "everybody's got to eat" message remain strong?

Sure, everybody's "got to drive" but is fuel what people want to support? That answer might be "yes." A recent poll conducted by the Biotechnology Industry Organization shows a majority of those surveyed want to support bio-fuels and their development. That's super news since the poll also showed they support government programs and

subsidies for renewable fuels. Yet you'll find the popular media doing its best to stoke the fires on the food-versus-fuel debate.

Add it all up and the farm bill may no longer be about feeding the world and supporting America's farmers. It may be about fueling America with domestic, renewable resources and keeping the cost of food low.

We're not going to predict the outcome, but this is no time to sit on the sidelines. Whether you have a new representative or you re-elected an incumbent, this is a time to be in touch. They need to know all the issues surrounding ag programs.

Farmers have long been a vocal, and powerful, lobby that sways even the most urban lawmakers. This time around, even big-city senators have to listen because expensive imported fuel is causing them a headache from their in-town constituents. Tell your story, and don't wait for someone else to do it for you. Stand up now, or sell later.