

Computer use in agriculture increases

By Denise Thompson
Staff Writer

Cows, crops, computers. What's wrong with this picture? Because of microcomputer applications in agriculture, nothing is.

While stereotypes about farmers and ranchers leave many people with the impression computers are not used on farms, Dr. James McGrann, Texas A&M extension economist, said the number of farmers and ranchers using computers is increasing.

McGrann leads a project to teach farmers, ranchers and those involved in agribusiness about microcomputer applications in agriculture.

Although McGrann supervises the project, four extension specialists work with county agents, farmers and ranchers around the state.

"We recognized that the microcomputer could become an important managerial tool to help farmers and ranchers become better business people," McGrann said.

"Also, we knew that it would become an important educational tool for us to teach them economics and finance, which is our primary responsibility."

Because most of the farmers taking the computer courses have a gross income of more than \$100,000, McGrann said their farm operations should be considered large businesses, of which 72 percent gross more than \$100,000 and 30 percent

gross more than \$250,000 per year.

"It helps if you think of these farms as a large business," he said. "They make important business, finance and marketing-type decisions. In Texas, we have more than 30,000 farms with a gross income of more than \$250,000."

Focusing on computer education, business management education using computers and software development distribution, the group has initiated several education programs.

Probably the most significant project started from these efforts is the development of an education center used as a computer training center, McGrann said.

Built on the Stiles Farm in Thrall, the original computer center was used to teach short courses on microcomputer use in farm and ranch management. However, because the first computer center was so successful, McGrann said they have extended the program to junior colleges and research centers around the state.

"What we do is bring in small groups of farmers, ranchers and agribusiness people and train them on specific subject matter using computers," McGrann said.

Courses taught during the sessions are specialized and concentrate on in-depth subject matter. Sessions last three days. The registration fee of \$125 includes educational material and spreadsheet software.

"If we're going to teach farmers and ranchers

about accounting, we have to get them in the class for at least three days," McGrann said. "It's intense because we're trying to give them a course in three days that a normal student would expect to take over a semester."

Courses offered include "Computer Applications in Family Financial Management" and "Farm and Ranch Accounting." McGrann said the most popular course is "Electronic Spreadsheets and Their Use in Agriculture."

"Electronic spreadsheet teaches them to set up and use decision aids, which are computer programs that help make marketing decisions using economics and finance," he said.

McGrann said the courses generally work best on larger farms with well-educated managers and decision makers. Complex farms that have multiple enterprises of crops and livestock also benefit from these courses because many decisions must be made in running them.

McGrann and his group also have begun to develop exclusive software packages for farms and ranches.

"We work directly with the farmers and ranchers to define what their needs are, and we work with them in terms of their terminology and what kind of decisions they need to make," McGrann said.

"We have a good distribution system where they order whatever software they need through a catalog, and it's sent to them just like they receive

magazines through the mail.

"Primarily, they ask us for programs dealing with economics, finance and marketing. These programs answer such questions as whether to put stock and cattle on wheat or take them to the feedlot — questions that are production and finance questions."

One of the most popular programs among farmers evaluates the government farm program.

"Each year the government has a certain setup of programs in terms of commodities, acreage controls, subsidy payments and other things that can become complex," he said.

"We develop decision aids to help people understand the government program."

McGrann said the software packages, which are IBM compatible, cost from \$25 to \$50.

In the eight years that McGrann and his team have been working with the idea of applying microcomputer technology to agriculture, McGrann says, the program has become one of the strongest in the country.

"We may not be the first program like this one in the United States, but we are certainly one of the strongest, and we hope to continue expanding with the needs of Texas' agricultural economy," McGrann said.

Tenneco takes steps to quit oil business

HOUSTON (AP) — Tenneco Inc., taking a giant step toward getting out of the risky oil business, announced Monday it had agreed to sell most of its oil and gas operations for an amount expected to exceed \$7.3 billion.

Although negotiations continued for some minor portions, the nation's 10th largest oil company said it had entered into definitive contracts with several buyers.

Gross proceeds from the transactions are expected to exceed \$7.3 billion, Tenneco said. Analysts earlier had predicted the sale would fetch between \$5 billion and \$7 billion.

The Houston-based company said in May it would sell Tenneco Oil Co., which makes up about 22 percent of total revenues — and use the proceeds to help pay its \$8.5 billion debt.

Companies buying up chunks of Tenneco Oil Co. include Chevron Corp., which said it had agreed to buy Tenneco's Gulf of Mexico oil and natural gas reserves, production facilities and leasehold interests for nearly \$2.6 billion. The San Francisco-based Chevron said the transaction will need federal approval.

Texas oilman T. Boone Pickens' Mesa Limited Partnership has entered an agreement to buy the mid-continent division oil and gas subsidiary for \$715 million in cash.

Dallas-based American Petrofina Inc. and Seagull Energy Corp. in Houston also announced plans Monday to get a piece of Tenneco.

Fina Oil and Chemical Co., American

Petrofina's principal operating subsidiary, has agreed to buy Tenneco's Gulf Coast-Southwestern exploration and production business in a stock purchase plan valued at a little more than \$600 million.

Seagull Energy has signed letters of intent to buy the outstanding capital stock of Houston Oil & Minerals Corp., an indirect wholly owned subsidiary of Tenneco, for \$16.4 million.

Tenneco had previously said it expects all the transactions to be completed by the end of the year. After the sale, company officials said Tenneco will be comprised of 31 percent farm and construction equipment, 23 percent pipeline, 14 percent shipbuilding, 13 percent auto parts, 10 percent packaging and 9 percent chemical.

The company said more information would be released Tuesday following a board meeting.

This summer, Tenneco posted net income of \$154 million for the 1988 second quarter. The earnings included a one-time gain of \$23 million related to the sale of a European shipping and storage company and a New Jersey heating oil retailing company.

Total sales and operations revenues for the quarter were \$3.9 billion. Operating income for the quarter was \$322 million, excluding operating income of \$147 million for Tenneco Oil Co.

James L. Ketelsen, Tenneco's chief executive officer and chairman, said in May that money from the planned sale of

its oil business might also be used to repurchase shares of the company's common stock, depending on market conditions and total proceeds from the sale.

Correction

The date of former White House Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Deaver's speech was incorrectly reported in *The Battalion* Monday. Deaver will speak about "Presidential Image-Making" at 7:30 p.m. today in Rudder Theater.

The lecture, sponsored by MSC Great Issues, is free and open to the public.

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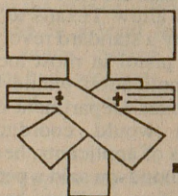
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