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AGRICULTURAL SCENE

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I feel it would be interesting to examine another agricultural statistic to see whether the birds have had any influence on the agriculturists in Ohio with respect to what crops they plant. It is interesting to note that in 1960 we had about 3,383,000 acres of corn grown for grain in the state. That acreage has remained relatively constant. A low point was reached in 1969. The 1969 crop year here in Ohio was an extremely wet season; therefore there was difficulty in getting the crop planted in the spring of the year and difficulty getting the crop harvested in the fall. That year the total acreage of corn was down to 2,740,000 acres. That is the low in corn for grain production for Ohio in the past 14 years.

1971 represents the high for corn acreage in the state, a little better than 3.5 million acres of corn for grain. This would suggest on a statewide basis, then, that apparently too many farmers are not being scared out of the corn for grain growing business as a result of depreddating bird pressure.

Tax receipts on production, of course, relate to the yield on an acre basis. However, I think the acreage is a more realistic figure to take a look at at this point. In order to more closely identify this possible factor, I took two counties in the state to examine as far as changes in corn acreage that may have occurred over the years.

Ottawa County is one of the counties chosen. It is a county that is bordered on the north side by Lake Erie and on most of the south side by Sandusky Bay. It is full of marshes and is a fine roosting habitat for all birds, and particularly Red-winged Blackbirds. Traditionally the Red-wing has had the highest incidence of damage to field corn over the years. The corn acreage in that county was at its high in 1960 with about 19,3000 acres. It reached its low in 1969, the same year that the state-wide acreage was at its low point, at 10,7000 acres. The final figures for 1972 are not yet compiled by our statistician, but the projected figure for 1972 was about 12,000 acres. This came as a bit of a surprise, because we constantly hear from the farmer that he is being pushed out of corn production in Ottawa County because of blackbirds. Yet the statistics suggest that there has really been little change in the corn acreage in the state or in that county over the last 15 years.

The second county chosen was Van Wert County on the Indiana line and three counties below the northwest corner of the state. It is right in the very heart of our part of the corn belt here in Ohio and traditionally has been a big corn growing county over the years. It produces its share of Red-wings during the nesting season, but there are no major roosting concentrations in that particular area. The corn grower in Van Wert County laughs when you even mention bird damage. He is not even familiar with blackbird damage to corn or grain in that particular part of the state. The acreage

in Van Wert County in 1960 was 66,000 acres. In the poor corn crop year of 1969 there was a low of 65,600 acres. The county reached a high in 1966 with 73,000 acres. Projected for 1972 is about 72,900 acres. Thus no appreciable change in acreage of corn grown in that particular part of the state has occurred in recent years.

Why? Why do they tell us that birds have such a profound effect on their cropping decisions although the statistics do not bear this out? I think it is safe to say, and I think we do need a great deal more in the way of sociological studies in this area, that when the growing season is good, and the prospects for good crops exist, and when the price looks like it is going to be good on that crop, the farmer is not too concerned with the fact that he may be losing a portion of that crop to birds. But when the prospects are not good, or when the price is down around a dollar or a dollar and ten cents a bushel for that crop, he looks for excuses. Birds can be a legitimate excuse for him.

I am not trying to belittle the significance of the problem at all, but I think that as public employees, and in my capacity with the Co-operative Extension Service, we are particularly vulnerable to this sort of thing. We are too often inclined to respond to public pressure rather than to actual biological information which may exist. One of the biggest challenges that I have in my Extension capacity is to meet with a group of irate farmers and try to convince them that their problem is not as significant as some of them would try to make it.

Something is happening right now as far as the situation on the agricultural scene here in Ohio goes at this minute. I have not had the first complaint in my office as the Wildlife Specialist working state-wide with Extension. I have not had the first complaint from a county agent, nor have I had the first complaint from a local grower this entire fall season. There has not been one complaint with respect to depredation bird damage to corn crops. However, this may or may not be a legitimate measure. They may not have confidence in our organization any longer, or they are just not encountering the problem at the level which was experienced four or five years ago when we spent a great deal of our time responding to these sorts of complaints.

Of course I think there is another factor. If you have looked at the market prices in the past few days, market quotes show corn prices are up, \$2.10, \$2.13, \$2.17 per bushel. The farmers are probably not going to be quite as concerned about a two, three, four bushel/acre loss. They may be concerned when prices are down around a dollar a bushel.

We keep hearing from these counties, where bird damage has been high in the past, that the farmers are going away from corn production into soybean production. I cannot blame a farmer in the State of Ohio or the midwest for switching from corn to soybeans with the market prospects being what they are right now. However acreage-wise, again in the two selected counties, there was an acreage range of a low in Ottawa County of 28,600 acres, or about 10,000 acres more soybeans than corn in 1960, to a high in 1973 of 44,800 acres. This is roughly two and a half times the acreage in soybeans as in corn. They are not switching from corn to soybeans, they are just diverting more and more acreage into soybean production. The same situation prevails in Van Wert County.