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Local News - Sunday, June 24, 2007

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Dairies in corn squeeze: Drought, ethanol demand driving up feed prices

By HARRIS BLACKWOOD
The Times
GAINESVILLE

Every day at the Truelove Dairy, cows are milked twice, once in the afternoon, again in the wee hours of the morning. With similar regularity, those cows have to be fed. There are 180 acres of corn and 50 acres of hay that aren't going to produce enough to feed the cows on the farm.

"The demand for corn seed to plant more acres of corn this year drove the price up and it also drove up the price of fertilizer," dairy owner Jerry Truelove said. "It takes a lot of fertilizer to grow corn."

It also takes rain, which has been in short supply this year.

Some of this year's corn crop, planted in mid-May, did not produce its first sign of a stalk until after the recent rainfall.

"The corn should be about waist-high," he said. Some of the corn is barely ankle high and most is about knee-high.



Scott Rogers The Times

Clermont dairy owner Jerry Truelove's cornfield is faring poorly this season due to the lack of rainfall. Truelove says his corn should be at least waist-high by this time of the season. With corn supplies driving up prices, dairy farmers like Truelove are finding it harder to feed their cows.



It's corn that is being blamed for much of the increase in producer and, ultimately, consumer costs of milk.

Last year, corn farmers averaged \$2.50 a bushel for their product. This year, many growers have signed contracts for corn at around \$4 a bushel. The increase is largely due to the demand for corn for use in ethanol, the alcohol-based fuel alternative.

A top state official said the demand goes beyond fuel.

"So much of what you eat involves corn, somewhere along the line," said Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture Tommy Irvin. He said corn is a primary feed ingredient for meat-producing animals, used as a sweetener in processed food, as a source of cooking oils and in cereals.

The demand for corn has prompted many farmers in South Georgia to switch their crop to corn instead of growing peanuts and cotton.

The drought has cut Truelove's farm production of corn and hay to half of what he needs. By fall, the bales of hay stored on the farm will be gone and he's not optimistic that the summer Bermuda hay, which has not yielded its first cutting, will help significantly.

"We normally get four cuttings in a normal year. This year, it could be a month from now before we get our first," he said.

The dairy cows get a feed mixture and corn silage, which has nearly doubled in price from last fall.

On top of that, the fuel costs for operating his farm vehicles has gone up as well.

"For the last three years, the milk prices were so low that we were either losing money or breaking even," Truelove said. "During that time, the processors and the stores didn't lower their prices to the consumers."

The cost of production and the price paid to farmers for milk has caused a number of dairies in Georgia to close.

"Our milk production has dropped way below our consumption," Irvin said. "That's a real concern because you want milk produced close to the market and a lot of it is now coming in from out of state."



Scott Rogers The Times

Dixie and Jerry Truelove operate their milking machines Thursday at their Clermont dairy.

Truelove is a member of the Maryland & Virginia Milk Producers Cooperative Association, which markets milk in the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic region.

Amber DuMont, the association's communications manager, said consumers sometimes fail to understand the cost of making milk.

"People forget about the costs that are involved in producing a gallon of milk and getting it to market," DuMont said. "We're all very sensitive when it comes to our pocketbooks and we feel the pinch whether we go to the gas station or to the grocery store these days. But dairy farmers feel those pinches on an even grander scale."

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