

Agriculture

Federal dairy price support program set to expire today

MONTPELIER, Vt. (AP) — When milk prices hit historic lows three years ago, a federal dairy price-support program helped farmer Dexter Randall and others weather the cycle.

“It filled in the hole that was missing to a degree to where you could stabilize yourself and not go behind,” he said.

Now with the Milk Income Loss

Contract program, or MILC, set to expire today, Randall is worried.

Like many farmers he’s quick to say the program is not ideal — he would prefer the money come from processors and not from the federal government.

But since there’s no other system in place, he acknowledges it has helped.

“I direly believe that it should be

extended,” said the state representative from Troy, who milks 105 cows.

Overall, the taxpayer-funded program has paid out a little more than \$2 billion to dairy farmers since its inception in 2002.

Because the program only pays farmers when prices are low, very little of that has come in the past two years, when prices have been above

average.

Even if Congress fails to renew the program by today, that will have no immediate impact because prices are too high to trigger any payments in October.

Vermont Agriculture Secretary Steve Kerr, though, said milk prices are expected to drop in 2006 and it’s time to prepare.

“All the signs are there that we’re

heading back into the cycle where prices are low because there’s plenty of milk around,” he said.

At a recent meeting of the New England governors, Gov. James Douglas sponsored a resolution encouraging Congress to extend the program. The resolution passed unanimously.

“The projected cost of this economic safety net is modest by com-

parison to the damage that will occur, particularly to the smaller dairy farms that make up the backbone of our farm population and milk supply, if it is allowed to expire,” the resolution said.

Sen. Herb Kohl, D-Wis., has said he doubted Congress would act on the program this week but was hopeful that it would be included in a final budget deal this fall.

Farmers reacting to fuel prices at busy time

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Maureen Torrey, the owner of an 11,000-acre vegetable farm in western New York’s Genesee County, is seeing her profit go up in smoke — diesel smoke.

Torrey normally spends more than \$1 million a year on fuel costs, but this year expects to spend at least \$300,000 more. She hasn’t looked at the projections lately, though.

“It’s too depressing,” she said. “Fuel is a major input cost for crops

and for processing vegetables. There really is no way to make an adjustment. All of our costs have skyrocketed. Everyone is looking to see how they can conserve, but it’s tough to cut back on some things.”

That is especially true now that most crop and vegetable farmers are in the middle of harvest season, the time of year when their trucks and equipment are most used.

“It could not come at a worse time,” said Mike Beard, a hog, corn and soybean farmer with a 1,000-

acre operation near Rossville, Ind., about 20 miles northwest of Indianapolis.

Beard said he’ll cut back on tilling and is leaving his corn plants in the field longer than usual in an effort to save money. He spent \$40,000 on propane to keep his animals warm last winter and expects that amount to double this year.

The average U.S. retail price of a gallon of unleaded gasoline was \$2.80 on Monday, below the all-time high of \$3.06 on Sept. 5, but

almost a dollar more than a year ago.

The average price of diesel fuel on Monday was \$2.73 a gallon, according to the federal Energy Information Administration. That’s 82 cents higher than it was a year earlier and nearly double what it was in September 2003.

Terry Francl, a senior economist with the American Farm Bureau Federation, said the Agriculture Department in February estimated U.S. farmers would pay \$8.2 billion for fuel this year. Officials expected that number to climb another \$2.5 billion with the higher prices and the effects of Hurricane Katrina, he said.

“Agriculture is very energy intensive,” Francl said. “There’s not a whole lot you can do.”

The cost of anhydrous ammonia fertilizer, made with natural gas byproducts, has increased by an estimated 25 percent this year. And that was prior to hurricanes Katrina and Rita, according to the Illinois Farm Bureau.

Thousands of cattle killed by flood waters

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Thousands of cattle may have been killed by floodwaters from Hurricane Rita, officials said.

In Cameron Parish alone, as many as 4,000 cattle may have died, and Louisiana Cattleman’s Association officials believe up to 30,000 cattle in the coastal parishes may be in trouble.

“At this point the cattle are standing in floodwaters and there is no dry place to drop food and water,” Commissioner Bob Odom said.

“We’re hoping to use airboats to drive them to higher ground.”

Poultry producers also were among those hard hit by the storm, officials said.

With power out in much of southern Louisiana, poultry producers had to use generators to keep their chicken houses cool

and operations running properly, adding to expenses.

Rain and storm surge left thousands of acres of sugar cane fields standing in water, Odom said.

“If it’s salt water from the storm surge then that cane is gone,” he said.

“It can’t tolerate salt water.”

The storm’s winds also flattened cotton fields in the north, where only about 40 percent of the crop had been harvested.

The remaining 60 percent of the crop was knocked to the ground and soaked.

Odom said farmers need federal grants, not loans.

“Low-interest loans aren’t going to cut it,” he said.

“You can’t borrow yourself out of debt.

“These people need real relief, real help not more debt.”

Wheat seeding making progress

WICHITA (AP) — Kansas farmers are making good progress in seeding their 2006 winter wheat crop, even as fall harvest of other crops picks up, Kansas Agricultural Statistics Service reported this week.

In its weekly crop update, the agency said 30 percent of the winter wheat has been planted, and 9 percent has now emerged.

This comes as more of the state’s

other major farm crops are harvested:

— About 43 percent of the corn has been harvested.

Corn condition is rated 3 percent very poor, 11 percent poor, 34 percent fair, 47 percent good and 5 percent excellent.

— Eight percent of the soybeans have been cut. Soybean condition is rated as 1 percent very poor, 9 percent poor, 37 percent fair, 47 percent

good and 6 percent excellent.

— About 13 percent of the sorghum has been cut. Sorghum condition is rated 3 percent very poor, 11 percent poor, 40 percent fair, 40 percent good and 6 percent excellent.

— Sunflower harvest is 7 percent in. Seed condition is rated as 1 percent very poor, 7 percent poor, 32 percent fair, 53 percent good and 7 percent excellent.

Corporate farming ban thrown out

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A federal judge has thrown out a lawsuit by a former state senator challenging Nebraska’s ban on corporate farming, saying he missed the deadline and failed to prove he had been harmed by the ban.

But state Sen. John DeCamp, who owns farmland and businesses that breed and raise hogs, said the issue wasn’t settled yet because a similar lawsuit was pending.

“I started the fire, it’s burning like a hothouse now and I’m happy and in hog heaven,” DeCamp said.

The ban was added to the state constitution through a petition drive spearheaded by the Farmers Union in 1982. It was enacted by supporters of small, family farms in an effort to ward off an influx of corporate farming in the state.

The ban generally prohibits corporations and certain other businesses from owning farmland or engaging in agricultural activity, although there are numerous exceptions.

Decamp’s lawsuit alleged that the ban interferes with interstate commerce and violates the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution, among other things. U.S. District Judge Laurie Smith-Camp threw out the lawsuit Wednesday.

The other lawsuit was filed by former Sen. Jim Jones and several others. It claims the ban violates the Americans With Disabilities Act because it requires at least one family member who owns the farm to be engaged in day-to-day physical activities on the farm. That, according to the lawsuit, discriminates against people with disabilities.

One of the other plaintiffs in that lawsuit is Shad Dahlgren of Lincoln, a paraplegic who owns part of a feedlot near Bertrand.

The ban exempts farms that are family owned and operated, non-profit corporations, American Indian tribal corporations, land used for seed or nursery purposes and land used for research or experimental purposes.

Potential violators can come into compliance by divesting of their agricultural activity or changing their ownership structure from a corporation or limited liability company to a general partnership.

Last year, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal of a decision declaring South Dakota’s ban on corporate farming unconstitutional.

That ruling, from the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, said South Dakota’s “Amendment E” is unconstitutional because it interferes with interstate commerce.

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