

Agriculture – Roots in our history

I once heard someone ask the question, “Where would you be without agriculture?” The answer, he replied is – “skinny, homeless and naked.” Now, this is wonderful for humor value, but think about it - basically it is the truth!

"Agriculture is the utilization of natural resource systems to produce commodities which maintain life, including food, fiber, forest products, horticultural crops, and their related services" is the definition given by Maine's Department of Education. Food, houses and clothing are all provided by products produced by the agricultural industry. The term agriculture derives from the Latin meaning ager, “a field” and cultura, “cultivation”. One of the single most important elements of our history is agriculture.

According to Wikipedia Encyclopedia, as of 2006, an estimated 36 percent of the world's workers were employed in agriculture, making it the most common occupation. We've come a long way from the 17th century when the first Europeans borrowed maize, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, pumpkins, sugar, tobacco and cotton from the Native Americans.

It is believed that agriculture began in Southwest Asia, in what is now called Iraq and Syria around 9500 B.C. The first crops consisted of first emmer, einkorn wheat, hulled barley, peas, lentils, bitter vetch, chick peas and flax. Approximately 2,500 years later, Egypt was producing wheat and barley and by 6000 B.C., farming was commonplace on the banks of the Nile River. In other parts of the world, such as China and Indonesia, rice was being grown in addition to mung, soy, azuki and taro. By 5000 B.C. the Sumerians improved on the process by utilizing cultivation, irrigation and labor to maintain their crops. Thus began a new wave of agricultural science that was becoming world wide.

As the years went by, people began to share knowledge and write down management practices for others to use. In America, most of the early farmers were utilizing oxen and horses for power. All sowing was done by hand and cultivation was done by hoe. Hay and grain was cut with a sickle. The early 1700's brought relief to the tired farmer with the invention of such machinery as the cradle and scythe, cotton gin, and plow.

By the 1800's machinery began to be manufactured and produced and factories were springing up around the landscape. Fertilizers were being sold commercially and agricultural products were more in demand than ever before. Other inventions such as barbed wire, combines and tractors made the production of agricultural products less labor intensive.

The 1900's brought extensive experimental work on the invention of disease-resistant varieties of plants, serums for cholera and artificial insemination of dairy cattle. Utilization of herbicides and pesticides became common place. By the 1980's biotechnology became a viable technique for improving crop and livestock products. Today, new technology and incentives provided by the government have assisted the land manager greatly.

Farm-City Week is celebrated nationally the week before Thanksgiving. On November 19th, the Highlands County 4-H County Council & Highlands County Extension Livestock Advisory offered a luncheon to kick off this important event. The celebration of Farm-City Week recognizes the contributions of land managers and efforts to build bridges between rural and urban communities.

In a proclamation by President George W. Bush, farmers and ranchers are recognized as part of our nation's national heritage. “As stewards of our land, our farmers and ranchers protect our soil, water, and wildlife habitat. With hard work, discipline, and ingenuity, they produce a safe and healthy food supply. Farmers and ranchers work closely with processors, transporters, and retailers, moving agricultural products from the farm to the homes of Americans and people around the world.”

So next time you sit down to a hearty meal or get dressed for the day, try to remember where the food and clothing came from and how it got there. During this holiday season when we give thanks, let's remember to be thankful for those who work so hard in the fields, factories, stores and even the truckers who bring these much needed supplies to us. Let us appreciate the folks whose labor provides these necessities for everyday life.

The United States Department of Agriculture through the Natural Resource Conservation Service offers many programs, technical assistance and cost share programs to land managers with their needs. Please feel free to contact the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District at (863) 402-6545 for information.