

New Delaware study points to benefits of irrigation

DOVER – Irrigation can increase grain production and profitability even in a near-ideal growing season, a new survey of Delaware cropland shows.

Delaware farm fields that used irrigation in 2013 produced 27 percent more corn per acre on average than non-irrigated fields, according to new data from the National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA.

Irrigated acres produced 40 bushels of corn per acre more than non-irrigated ones, or 189 bushels for irrigated land compared to 149 bushels for non-irrigated land, the survey shows.

“Irrigation is an incredibly valuable tool that can help increase economic stability and improve profits even in a record-setting corn yield year like 2013,” Secretary of Agriculture Ed Kee said. “This data shows how an initial investment can make yields more predictable and let farmers influence production in periods of drought.”

Kee noted that irrigation also has environmental benefits, making crops more efficient in the uptake of nutrients so they don't stay in the soil during dry weather and then add to nutrient loading during the wet fall and winter months.

The data is the first time Delaware has compared yields for irrigated and non-irrigated corn. Of the 174,000 acres harvested for corn for grain in 2013, 43 percent – or 75,000 acres – were irrigated, the data shows. About 57 percent, or 99,000 acres, were not irrigated.

Delaware corn producers saw a record average yield of 166 bushels per acre in 2013, beating the previous record of 162 bushels per acre, in 2000.

An innovative partnership now in its fourth year offers help to Delaware farmers who want to add new irrigation systems. The Delaware Rural Irrigation Program, or DRIP, offers no-interest loans to install new equipment in partnership with private lending institutions.

Eligible farmers must have been actively engaged for at least two years in growing and harvesting of cash crops, such as corn, soybeans, fruit and vegetables, in Delaware, and must own or lease the land to be irrigated.

The loan fund finances up to 25 percent of the total project cost, not to exceed \$25,000, at zero interest for a term of no longer than seven years. Repayment of principal must begin in year three of the loan. Financing is limited to one project per farm each year.

DRIP loans can help farmers add new irrigation systems, including center pivot, linear move, towable systems, span angle systems, corner arm systems, single phase systems or wells and filters associated with drip irrigation systems. All work must be performed by experienced and qualified contractors licensed in and located in Delaware.

Farmers interested in participating should contact James Pennewell at the Delaware Economic Development Office at 302-672-6807 or james.pennewell@delaware.gov. Applications should be submitted concurrently with approved bank financing. The loan application will be reviewed by DEDO Capital Resources staff with comment from the Department of Agriculture.

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Delaware corn for grain, 2013

Irrigated: 77,000 acres planted ... 75,000 acres harvested ... 189 bushels/acre yield

Non-irrigated: 103,000 acres planted ... 99,000 acres harvested
... 149 bushels/acre yield

Total: 180,000 acres planted ... 174,000 acres harvested ... 166
bushels/acre yield

Source: USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service

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