Computer systems help farm families

By Chuck Jagoda

The use of computers in agriculture promises to save the farmer time and make him more efficient than anything since the plow, a computer salesman said.

Randy Calder, a systems support specialist and computer salesman for Team Electronics in Lincoln, said, the recent growth of the agricultural computer market is a direct result of development of the microcomputer. Microcomputers use silicon chips instead of larger, more expensive bacuum tubes to process large amounts of information quickly.

Calder was answering questions about agricultural uses of computers at the Nebraska State Fair.

"Microcomputers first came out in 1975," he said.

Last year marked the first big expansion on the personal computer into the farm market when about 500,000 were sold, he said.

"These first years should see a growth increase of 200 percent per year," he said.

Computers used

Farmers can use computers to keep records, forecast seasonal inventory and financial needs, monitor cash flow and solve a variety of agricultural problems, he said.

"An agricultural program may ask a farmer to type in the current grain price, number of bushels he expects to harvest, his target moisture contest, hauling and interest costs, and it will calculate his net crop value after storage on-farm versus off-farm, in a grain elevator, for example," he said.

"Computers allow the user to play the 'what if' game," he said. "The farmer can analyze his business to find out at what point it is more profitable to use one process or another."

Programs available

Farmers can purchase several computer programs such as AGDISK, developed at Harris Technical Systems, a division of Harris Laboratories of Lincoln. "AGDISK is a series of management programs in such areas as finance, soil analysis, corn and soybean analysis and livestock break-even analysis. All the other programs tie in to a main farm accounting package," he said.

In addition, the agricultural computer users can tie into resource computer networks such as AGNET at UNL's Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Computer networks provide a data bank where users can locate information on a variety of subjects from several sources.

"The first computer time-sharing network was The Source based in McLean, Va.," said Pat Ebmeier, AGNET coordinator. "We're unique in that we don't expect our users to know anything about computers."

Farmers only have to be able to type with at least one finger, he said, because their enthusiasm to solve a problem will pull them through.

AGNET users have access to UNL's computers through their home telephone jacks. Users pay a $50 subscription for each year, and they also pay for the time they use the UNL system.

James Kendrick, professor of agricultural economics and co-leader of AGNET, said the service provides the farmer or rancher with "a highly specialized information system. They can get time-critical information from around the world that effects management decisions."

AGNET was developed in 1975, and the program expanded to Scottsbluff in 1977. This was the first extension of usage outside the UNL campus.

Under a federal grant period that extended until July 1, 1980, AGNET expanded to other Old West states (North and South Dakotas, Montana and Wyoming.) Each one has a coordinator and program staff to help users make use of existing programs and to develop new ones," Ebmeier said.