

Weekly Market Bulletin

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From Your Commissioner

Climate Change

The weather is something that all farmers (and probably all people) love to talk about. My father, who was born in 1922, remembers being able to go ice skating before Thanksgiving, something I have never been able to do. He also often noted the daily weather on the egg charts and I know that in the 1950's and 60's, it got a lot colder, more frequently than it has in a number of years. This summer was hotter than usual. We have certainly seen more rain from August until now, than I can remember having in any similar time frame. Ski areas are opening earlier this year than ever before, and I just heard on the news that we could get record cold this week. It has not been a typical year. So, what does it all mean? Perhaps not much, if we are looking at weather trends over a couple of hundred years versus the 4.5 billion year history of the earth, but maybe it means a lot. To me it certainly does seem that the climate is changing.

About eight years ago, I stumbled across the 1941 United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) annual report; titled "Climate and Man". The report consists of over 1200 pages, you can find a copy of it in the state library, but I have purchased copies of it over the years in antique shops and on line. We have learned much about the history of the earth, including the weather in the 77 years since the report was written, but I think the foundation of the report is worth considering as we deal with what appears to be a changing climate.

At the time the report was written, it was believed that the world was 1.5 billion years old, not even close in age to what today's scientists believe. What is interesting is that they believed that in 1.5 billion years, there had been four ice ages and that we were living during the tail end of the fourth one. They condensed the history of the earth into a 365-day calendar. That calendar shows us living at the stroke of midnight on December 31st, with mankind having shown up just six hours ago and beginning our record keeping one minute and 12 seconds ago. In that scenario there have only been polar ice caps for three days. We now believe that the history of the earth is much older, so with what we know today man has only been on the planet for one minute and 17 seconds and only keeping records of the weather for 23 seconds. Now we do have some idea of what the weather was like before then, but we really don't know what it was like in any one short period of time.

The USDA report states those ice ages, such as the one we are in are “revolutions” and the times when there are no ice caps are “normal” times. The difference between the two is delicate and a rise of two degrees in the temperature of the earth now would be sufficient to melt the polar ice and we would be then living in “normal” climate. They state that the climate all over the earth would be more like that in the maritime regions today – not so hot around the Equator, much less cold towards the Poles, much less variable from day to day and season to season.

Over the years people have told me that the USDA came to the right conclusion, but for the wrong reasons; they have never told me why the report is wrong, other than to say that we have more and better data today. I am sure that is right, but I am not sure that the information they had nearly 80 years ago didn't lead them to the right conclusion for the right reasons. It does seem to me that we are going to end up at the same place, so why aren't we planning for that? If we spend all our time and resources trying to prevent something that is just a natural cycle and not man-made, then we may be very sorry.

Shawn N. Jasper – Commissioner