

Low prices, bad weather challenge area farmers

BY JOAN RANSBERRY
Staff Writer

Finding a brand spanking new weather vane underneath the family Christmas tree would suit dairy farmer Paul Hulshof just fine.

Since weather has the power to make and, at times, the tenacity to break a farmer, accuracy in weather forecasting is critical.

Topping Hulshof's New Year's wish list is weather fit for a farmer. Since there are 108 days left until planting season begins, the importance of weather increases with the passing time. Rain hammered southern Ontario in record amounts in 2000. Crops either rotted or drowned in the fields.

This past summer, the weather gods did an about face, hitting Ontario with one of the worst droughts in decades. Crops literally burned in the fields. Hulshof wondered if he'd be forced to buy feed for the 40 milkers at his Whitchurch-Stouffville operation. Hulshof was born on a dairy farm. He knows no other life and he doesn't want to.

A recent study shows the Greater Toronto Area dairy farms, including York Region's, are models of efficiency and technological innovation. They produce more than 100 million litres of milk worth more than \$65 million. That accounts for 18 per cent of total gross farm receipts in Ontario in a year. Hulshof pointed out that production rates are on the climb

due to efficiency in farming methods.

Many farmers are facing grave problems. Depressed pricing has knocked the wind out of a large sector of the industry. To add insult to injury, the federal government pretty much turned a turned a deaf ear on corn, grain and oil seed producers. While U.S. and European farmers were granted subsidies from their governments, Canadians weren't given the same consideration.

John Doner's New Year's wish is not something he wants. Rather, it's what he doesn't want. The Richmond Hill farmer doesn't want to abandon his farm and join a convoy of tractors, combines and trucks as a last ditch attempt to catch the federal government's attention. "Why do it again?" he said. "We did it."

"Where the barn stood, there is now a huge pile of topsoil. I get a sad feeling every time I drive by."

Another thing on Doner's need list is a sound national farm business plan. "The agricultural industry has an \$95-billion impact on Canada and it's been done without a business plan. Canada is the only G7

country without such a plan. It makes no sense. Overall, at the federal level in 2002, we need food sovereignty, food safety and sustainability.

The preservation of prime agricultural land is an issue province-wide, particularly in York Region, stressed Jack Wilkinson, president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.

While much attention has been given to the Oak Ridges Moraine, there remains a need to protect the productive farm land around the moraine, said Wilkinson. "There's a them (urban) against us (rural) issue brewing in York Region and it needs attention."

When Region of York Federation of Agriculture President Brian Reynolds looks to the future, his concerns are also linked to the preservation of prime farm land.

"Living in Markham, I see the change in the municipality as I witness the removal of topsoil from what were excellent producing farms," said Reynolds. "I lived on a farm between the 16th Avenue and Major Mackenzie Drive for almost 10 years. Where the barn stood, there is now a huge pile of topsoil. I get a sad feeling every time I drive by."

Development of prime agricultural land in the Greater Toronto Area is happening at an alarming rate, he noted.

According to a recent study,



Paul Hulshof in the stables of his farm at Kennedy and Bloomington roads in Whitchurch-Stouffville. Like many area farmers, Hulshof would like good farming weather for the new year.

STAFF PHOTO/SIGERD WITTEVEEN

more than five per cent of Canada's land mass is classified as prime agricultural land.

"Most of the land in the GTA is in this five percent," said Reynolds. To emphasize the loss of farm land in the area, Reynolds noted between 1976 and 1996, the number of farms in York Region dropped by 36 per cent. This accounts for a loss of 150,000 acres.

"There is a great need to preserve this excellent land. The importance goes far beyond the production of fresh, safe, good quality food," said Reynolds. "Agriculture supports 34,700 jobs in the GTA."

Farming in York Region is, indeed, serious business, taking in dairy, beef, horse, pork, sheep, poultry, grain, fruit and vegetables and mixed.

York Region is home to about 1,225 farms totaling about 132,000 acres.

Also affecting an already serious problem is age: farmers' average age is 56. And 73 per cent of 8.5 million acres of usable farm land in Ontario is owned by people older than 60.

"Think about that," said John Doner. "Just think about it."

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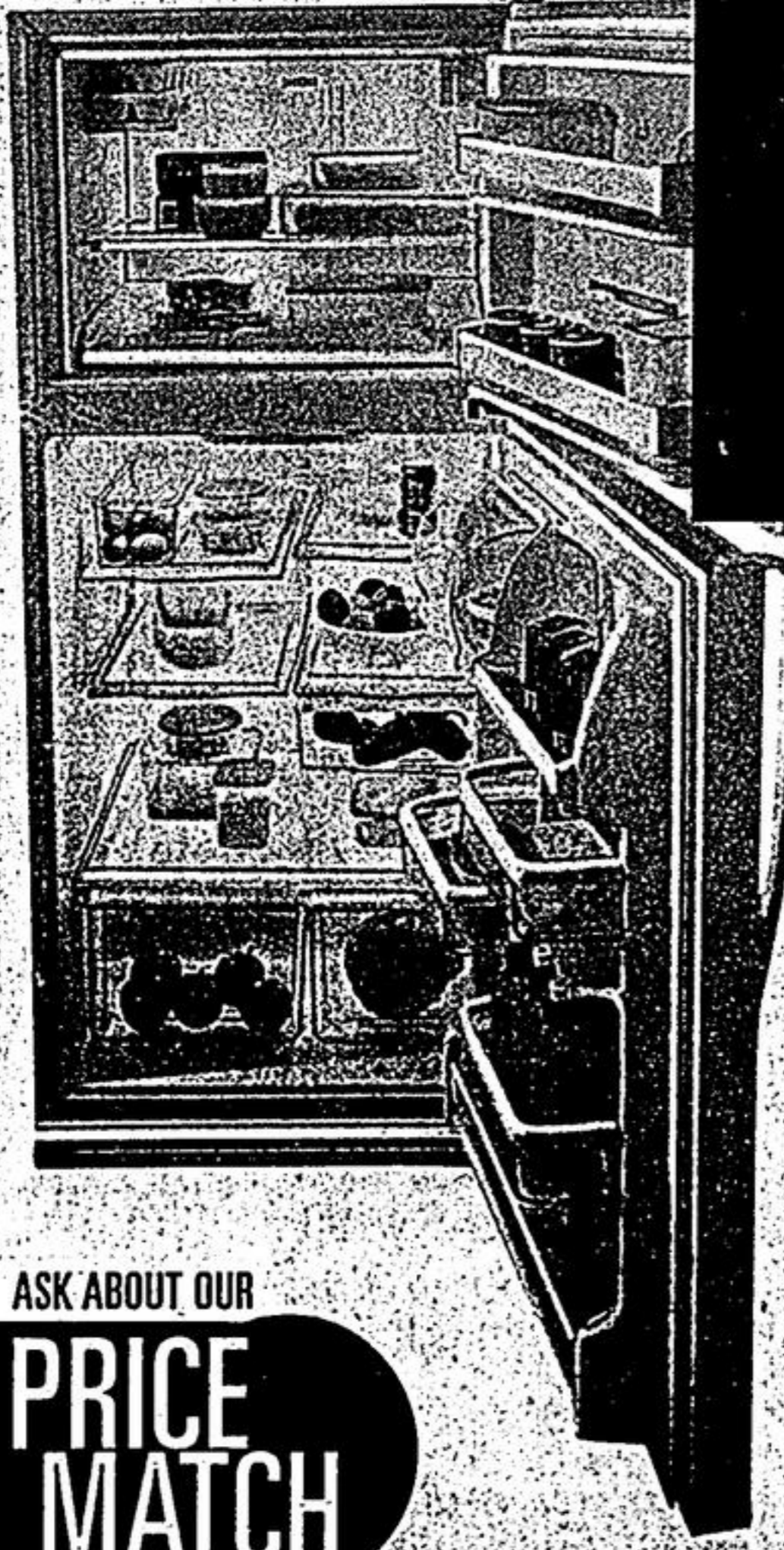
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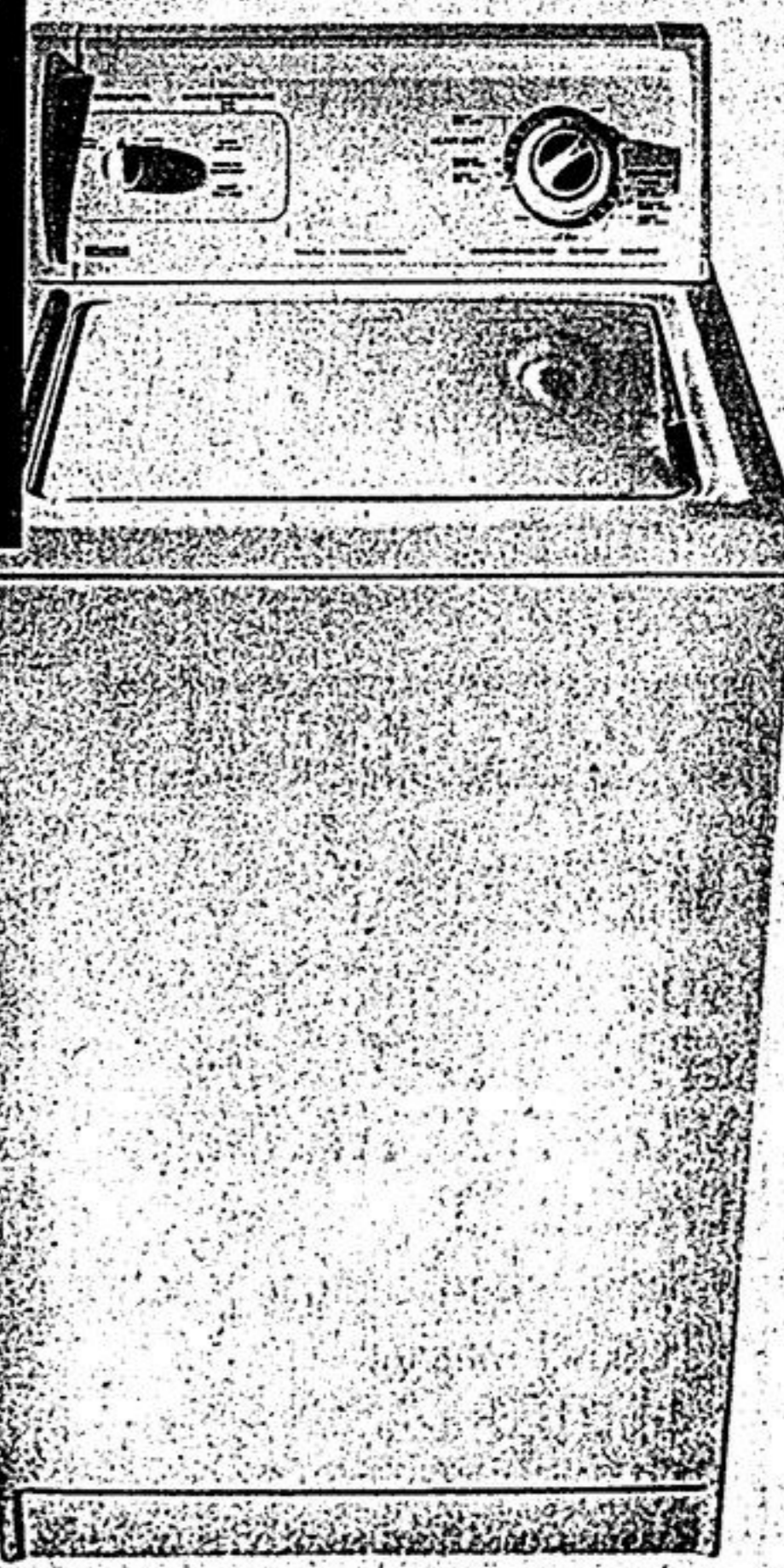
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