

Some farmers trade tractors for animals

HOPKINTON, R.I. (AP) — Metal clinks against rocks in the soil as four of Jim Cherenzia's horses pull his harrow through seven acres of hay.

Cherenzia rides behind in a small cart, rolling gently as the soil cultivator's blades cut into the dirt. The air fills with the sounds of the creaking harrow, harness bells and occasional soft snorts as the procession moves steadily through the field.

"There's nothing more enjoyable than plowing hay with a horse," Cherenzia said.

He is among a small but dedicated group of farmers who use animals rather than machines to do work around the farm. While they embrace modern conveniences in other parts of their lives, they say shunning tractors helps the environment and saves money on gas.

Cherenzia uses Percherons — large, sturdy war horses originally bred in France — to plow and spread manure. Over the years, he has used them to log, bale hay and plant corn, and in warm weather, he hitches them to carriages for weddings and other events.

"Tractor's probably a whole lot more sensible," said Cherenzia, who owned one briefly in the 1970s.

"But I'm trying to make some nice horses too. And it's enjoyable."

The U.S. Census Bureau stopped tracking the number of farms using animal power after 1960, when it counted 4.7 million tractors and 3 million horses and mules used for work.

Today, there's no good estimate on the number of farmers using draft animals like horses, mules, and oxen, but it's probably tens of thousands, said Leah Patton of the 4,500-member American Donkey and Mule Society.

Tim Huppe, who owns BerryBrook Farm and BerryBrook Ox Supply in Farmington, N.H., estimated there are 3,500 oxen teams in New England.

"A lot of small farmers don't want tractors leaking on their land," Huppe said. "If you look at the whole package, you're not buying any petroleum, and all the waste, the manure, goes back on the land."

Animals are not always cheaper, but small farmers can come out ahead in some ways, said Chet Kendall, a farmer and economics professor at Brigham Young University-Idaho. A fifth-generation fruit farmer, he began studying the economics of draft animals after using them on his farm in North

“The more you use the tractor, the less it's worth.”

Gail Damerow
Gainesboror, Tenn, farmer

Ogden, Utah.

Kendall, 53, once used a tractor, but traded it for horses to keep his four children involved in the family business. His 15-year-old son, he said, "definitely had a preference for coming out and working with the horses."

Large, commercial farms require machines that can work around the clock without tiring. But unlike tractors, animals reproduce. They cost a few thousand dollars or less and can be used for plowing in the spring, hay rides in the fall and logging in the winter.

Machines depreciate, while animals can be trained and sold at a profit.

"The more you use the tractor, the less it's worth. The more you use a horse, the more it's worth," said Gail Damerow, a farmer and editor of Rural Heritage magazine in Gainesboro, Tenn.

As gas prices increase, Damerow said she's fielded more questions from farmers who want to use their

animals for more tasks.

John Trombley, 53, of Carney, Mich., has had horses and mules for several years and uses them to cultivate his field and pull a wagon. He also takes teams to church on Sundays, saving on gas.

"It's fun, and it never hurts to save a few dollars at the same time," he said.

Driving animals makes economic sense only if farmers have enough land — about 40 acres — to grow food for them, he said. Otherwise, they have to pay for commercially grown hay.

Trombley, who also teaches math and computers, said the animals give him a break from the hectic pace of modern life. He turns off his cell phone when he climbs onto the wagon and rides back to a simpler time.

"If I come home from school," he said, "and it's been a stressful day, the best thing for me to do is hook up the team and go for a ride. In 15 minutes, the stress is gone."

Biking Across Kansas ends 500-mile journey

ARMA (AP) — Bicyclists on an annual trek across Kansas ended their 500-mile journey after a week that took bicyclists through nine host cities.

Biking Across Kansas ended Saturday in Arma. Bicyclists had stopped overnight in Girard, then took a 25 mile round-trip to the state line and back.

"I see a lot of exhausted faces," Charlie Summers, Biking Across Kansas executive director, said as he looked out on Arma City Park, where the riders had gathered.

Summers, who has ridden on the tour every year since 1978, said it was one of the hardest trips the group has done.

This year's trip began June 9 and 10 with 800 bicyclists at Johnson City, near the Colorado border.

Biking Across Kansas began in 1975, and the route, although it varies, generally goes from west to east, so riders have help from the wind.

But Summers said riders on this year's ride faced a strong east wind on the second day and the ride

from Satanta to Ashland was 85 miles.

Still, he noted, others had recalled harder trips. "So it's in the eye of the beholder," Summers said.

From Ashland, bicyclists went to Medicine Lodge, then Clearwater, then Burden, followed by Neodesha and Girard.

At Arma City Park, bikes were strewn on the grass and rental trucks waited to haul away the bikes and luggage.

Bicyclists and their families lined up around the park's perimeter to wait for Chicken Annie's.

Sharon and Gary Branson, of Ozawkie, sat with their 14-year-old grandson, Cole, in the grass, finishing their chicken.

"The whole family came down to pick us up," said Sharon Branson, who became involved with the event in 2001. Her husband started the year before and Cole started when he was 11.

"You can't hardly explain it to someone who hasn't done it," she said.

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