



STU ELLIS

Decatur should be home of Farm Show

Last week's rainout of two of the three days of the Farm Progress Show made more news than if the event had taken place as scheduled.

For reasons only known to Mother Nature, the show site in northwestern Vermillion County was the only spot in Illinois to receive drenching rains. One inch of rain Monday, 5 inches of rain Tuesday night and 1 inch of rain late Wednesday washed out tens of millions of dollars worth of exhibits, personnel expenses and business for the more than 50 exhibitors.

For the past 50 years, the Farm Progress Show has focused on agriculture in Iowa, Illinois and Indiana and traditionally rotated annually among those states. Many local folks remember when the show put Dalton City on the map in 1991.

The cancellation Wednesday and Thursday of the Farm Progress Show was a necessity, despite the best efforts of the show staff to pave miles of streets with wood chips and try to find parking alternatives. But in the end, you can't park 50,000 cars, buses and pickup trucks in a field that is not just muddy but is below the surface of the water.

A similar occurrence happened at Aleman, Iowa, about 15 years ago when a 6-inch rainstorm flooded the exhibit and parking areas the day before the show was to open. That caused an instant cancellation and pushed the Farm Progress companies to experiment with a semi-permanent show site that featured paved streets and an exhibit field that would drain excess water.

A similar plan may be on the agenda for an Illinois site that would allow the show to weather storms and provide continuity in some of the field trials that allow machinery makers to roll out new equipment at the event.

The Decatur area could make such a deal with the Farm Progress staff. Because the editorial office of *Prairie Farmer* magazine is located in Decatur, Farm Progress Inc. is already familiar with the territory. Why not create a site on the north side of Decatur for a permanent home for the Farm Progress Show?

Show planners require good highway access, and a combination of I-72, U.S. 51 and state routes 121 and 48 all provide that access. Show planners need a significant number of motel rooms within a reasonable distance. That requirement could easily be met with the thousands of rooms in Decatur, Forsyth, Springfield, Bloomington and Champaign.

The Decatur-Macon County Fairground would be a good site for a permanent exhibit area. Although the show is only three days long, set-up for some exhibits begins a month in advance. That would allow 11 months of events at the fairground, including the Macon County Fair, which would benefit from the permanent structures that companies exhibiting at the show would build.

What would the community have to do to secure a permanent event that would bring people from around the world to Decatur for three days to conduct tens of millions of dollars worth of business?

It would take a commitment by the Chamber of Commerce for Decatur and Macon County, the Economic Development Corporation of Decatur and Macon County, the Decatur Area Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Macon County Farm Bureau, which owns the fairground. I have a feeling one of them is already on board.

If anyone wants to discuss it further, my calendar is open.

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