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Surviving a Drought: A Farmer's Old-Fashioned Lessons

This is the VOA Special English Agriculture Report.

In recent days the remains of what had been Hurricane Isaac moved into the American Midwest. The storm brought rain to some of the areas suffering from the country's worst drought in half a century. But the rain might have come too late to save many farmers' corn and soybean crops.

Crop insurance will help reduce financial losses for most of the farmers. Crop insurance is a tool that is not available to most growers in the developing world. The federal government helps pay the cost of the coverage against natural disasters.

But not every farmer in the United States chooses to buy crop insurance. Dick Thompson of Boone, Iowa, says he operates his farm the way farmers did in the past.

DICK THOMPSON: "I'm old-fashioned, and I'm proud of it."

He uses very little chemical fertilizer, weed killers or insecticides, and does not grow genetically modified crops. He says these practices will help him survive the drought. And he says they are already earning him more money per hectare than his neighbors who farm the modern way.

Scientists are trying to understand why his practices are working. Matt Liebman has copied many of them at his research fields at Iowa State University.

MATT LIEBMAN: "The reason we're doing this is because of what he's doing. So he was doing it before we did this. He was a good teacher. And what we're doing here is trying to understand some of the scientific mechanisms that explain the patterns that he's observed on his own farm."

Many Iowa farms today grow only corn and soybeans. Payments from crop insurance keep farmers in business when their crops do poorly, like in this year's drought.

DICK THOMPSON: "Well, I have never bought crop insurance since we started to farm."

Instead of crop insurance, he protects himself by growing other kinds of crops in addition to corn and soybeans. He raises hay and oats, along with cattle and pigs. He harvested his oat crop before the drought hit.

DICK THOMPSON: "I think it's common sense. You've got diversity. And you've got some protection there. If one crop doesn't do well, maybe the other one will make up for the difference."

That common sense used to be common practice on farms in Iowa, the heart of America's corn, or maize, production. But farmers are growing hay on only half as much land as they did twenty years ago. And oat production has fallen by almost ninety-five percent.

Livestock production has also shrunk. Dick Thompson says he will sell some of his cows and hogs, but not all of them. They provide more than money. They also provide the manure that he uses to fertilize the soil, instead of chemical fertilizers. And the manure helps the soil hold water. Iowa State University researcher Rick Cruse says that is another kind of insurance.

RICK CRUSE: "It really adds to the condition of that soil that does favor crop growth, particularly under stress conditions. And that's the kind of conditions we're experiencing this year."

These are conditions that farmers everywhere might face more often with climate change. Matt Liebman says his research shows that all farmers can learn from Dick Thompson.

MATT LIEBMAN: "Looking towards diversity, crop-livestock integration, the careful stewardship of the soil, making the best use of every drop of rain that falls. I mean, those things are all lessons that we should know here. And they're even more important elsewhere."

And that's the VOA Special English Agriculture Report. You can read and listen to our story and watch a video about Dick Thompson's farm at voaspecialenglish.com. I'm Jim Tedder.

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