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## More Gloom than Doom about Micro-computers for Farmers

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Peter Nuthall's response exhibits just the sort of over-optimism about the scope for use of computers on farms that we sought to moderate in our original article. While we deliberately adopted a particularly pessimistic stance in forecasting the doom of computer-based farm recording systems, we did so because we believed (and still believe) that there are considerable dangers in the view that computers provide the way to a nirvana of farming efficiency for most farmers.

We find little in the evidence provided by Nuthall on the use of computer systems by farmers that leads us to change our view that only a small minority of farmers will adopt this technology. Nuthall reports that only 350 farmers in Britain are using the widely-promoted Farmplan system and that there are only about 300 micro-computers owned by New Zealand farmers. Both figures would be very unimpressive if expressed as percentages of the respective total populations. While as many (or as few) as 15 per cent of New Zealand farmers may have expressed a desire to buy a micro within the next five years, we predict that actual purchases will fall short of that mark. It is not unusual for capital investment plans to be upset by lack of funds. The news that Christchurch pharmacists apparently do not face severe capital rationing seems to imply more about the health of the local population than about the future of computers on farms.

We would be less concerned about the attitudes displayed in Nuthall's response had he shown greater awareness of some of the disadvantages of computerised farm recording systems. The list of drawbacks would be a long one, but would include:

- (a) loss of flexibility in the format in which records are kept (because of the need to use standard software packages);
- (b) inaccessibility of the records to direct visual inspection, particularly important in the event of hardware or software failure;
- (c) relatedly, the limitations, on some systems at least, on the editing of records that have been stored on disc;
- (d) the high cost of learning how to use a system and the costs of mistakes during the learning phase;
- (e) the lack of portability of systems, which generally cannot be taken to workplaces in the field; and
- (f) the risk of loss of records through operating errors or other faults.

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We conclude by echoing a comment of Nuthall's. "No doubt many farmers, due to their type of farming, their particular objective function, resource base, and lack of willingness to learn new skills will never invest in a micro-computer-software combination (except, perhaps, for general educational and recreational purposes)". This is our point exactly. We have no doubt that some farmers will buy micro-computers, especially if they have video-games for the family. But our guess is that only a small minority of (Australian) farmers will make sufficient effective use of micro-computers to justify the cost as a farm investment—and these will be primarily used for accessing computerised data bases, and selling farm products, rather than for farm recording systems.