

# The Farm Problem

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A County Agent fears that the farmers' acceptance of subsidies will be used by government as proof that it has thereby acquired the right to control their lands

WASHINGTON is again ringing with debate about the farm program and changes that ought to be made in it.

That is good. The program is far from perfect. Much of the compromise behind it was due to politics, and for a while there seemed to be more concern about who was to blame for the dip in farm prices than what should be done about it.

If the signs mean anything, much the same kind of a storm is brewing just ahead. Many of the arguments we will hear in the next few months will have a familiar ring.

Let's take a quick look at some new ideas on the subject. As county agent, my work is with people, primarily farm people. The words are mine but the ideas are theirs.

I AM CONCERNED — and rightfully so, I think — not so much with the farm program itself as with its effect, its impact on the lives and livelihood of the people I work with.

That's why I am disturbed. If anybody had told me 25 years ago that today's farmer would need permission to sell wheat and the sheep men would be lined up for a check from the U. S. Treasury, I'd have said he was dreaming. Strange to say, the situation is apparently accepted by most of our people.

Although violently disagreeing with the principle involved, an ever-increasing segment of our people act as though they believed the government should guarantee success to everyone, especially to them.

This attitude is largely because our recent national prosperity was accompanied by an increasing amount of government control.

We're confusing cause and effect. As a result, more and more people clamor for reservations on the gravy train.

Just yesterday I got a letter from a farm wife who asked, "Why isn't the price of eggs supported? My husband sells corn and wheat on a government market."

IN MY ANSWER, I pointed out that she could probably do more to solve her egg-marketing problem than the government could. And finally, if all else fails, she didn't have to stay in the egg business. Or if, as she says, "The margin is too wide between what we get and what the consumer pays," then why doesn't she get into the egg-handling business? It is still a free country, isn't it?

I don't think she liked my answer any more than a child likes to be told there is no Santa Claus. And for the same reason: Uncle Sam has been Santa to so many other people, why shouldn't he be Santa to her?

Her letter raised this question, in effect: If the government is going to support prices on anything, shouldn't it do so on everything?

PRICE SUPPORT arguments usually start a whole chain of fuzzy thinking. Talk to anyone who is for price supports and right away he says something like this: "Look at all the help labor and other groups get from Uncle Sam. Why shouldn't the farmer get his cut?"

He admits that the government shouldn't be helping anybody but then he turns right around and asks for help himself. Such reasoning is dangerous. Two wrongs do not make a right. If other groups are getting more than their share from the government, let's lower the boom on them.

Another argument we heard during the recent election campaign was: "Farmers are going broke." Sure they are. Free men will always go broke. Businessmen and farmers alike are going broke — and for the same reason: The prin-

ciple of competition and free enterprise are at work. The least efficient are losing out. Is that bad?

Would we make much progress if we reward the poor worker the same as the good? Should the government help either a poor farmer or barber, when most of his trouble is caused by his own lack of skill or by business factors within his control?

GOOD FARMERS are making money — real money, by following the best practices and doing a good job of management. They have enlarged on their opportunities and are using to the full their unequaled educational and service advantages.

The good farmer is also a good thinker. He knows that to help anyone who is not doing his best is to destroy initiative and lower efficiency. Did the dairyman cull out the low-producing cow when he had a high guaranteed price?

So much for price supports. What about Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP) payments? Are they a curse or a cure? Are they "of great value in getting the farmer to adopt better methods"? Or do they merely keep him in the harness while he drags agriculture down toward the peasant level?

At best, these payments are poor public relations. Labor and other nonfarm groups look at the total cost to the taxpayer and yell loudly. They fail to realize that out of the dollars which the program costs only pennies ever get into the farmer's pocket. Yet farmers are blamed for the whole bill.

The effect of the payments, if not their purpose, is to divert attention from the fact that the farm program has failed miserably to solve the basic ills of agriculture. ACP payments confuse the issue, muddy the water. They treat the symptom rather than the disease.

Continued on Page 2

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Continued from Page 1

Still worse, they befuddle farmers and divide them until they no longer agree on what their trouble really is.

The worst feature is that it questions a farmer's honesty or his sanity. The application forms contain a statement that the farmer would not carry out the listed conservation practices without federal aid. Let's take a closer look at this.

Popular projects on the docket here in Illinois are the "initial" application of lime and rock phosphate. "Initial" means that these are new practices, that they have not been used before under the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation (ASC) program. Since they change the name every year or so (it used to be AAA, PMA, etc.), it is easy for a farmer to say he has never used lime before (under ASC), even though that particular field may have been limed twice or more under some previous program.

How can lime and phosphate be thought of as *new* practices, when we've known about them and the good results possible from their proper use, for so many years? Research has shown that, where they are needed, their use will return about 15 to 1 on the investment; that is, every dollar spent will return 15. Knowing this — and it is common knowledge among farmers who read or talk or listen to the radio — how can any farmer truthfully say he wouldn't use lime or phosphate?

How can he sign the required statement without making himself out either a fool or a liar? Yes, those are two bad words. But the situation I described in using them is even worse. And it has government sanction.

WHAT DOES it do to a farmer — deep down inside — to have his arm twisted in such a way just to get a few dollars for something he knows darned well he would do anyway? What will he shut his eyes to next? Where will all this sort of thing end?

I am not a student of political science. But I believe that every ACP check a farmer endorses will some day be used against him as evidence that he agrees the government has an interest in his land and therefore a right to some control over its use. Thus every check becomes a milestone on the road to socialism — government ownership of land and productive wealth.

STEP BY STEP, we're getting in deeper all the time, yet each succeeding step comes easier. Like the fish that can't resist the fancy lure, the farmer is veritably hooking himself.

We'd like to ask: Will the hook always be baited? Or will the time come when the government will tell the farmer what to do? How long will it be before the sugar coating is replaced by a mailed fist?

Finally — let's face it — government giveaway programs, if that's what they are, will always help the nonfarmer more than the farmer simply because the farmer is outnumbered six to one at the polls. There are more nonfarmers than farmers, and we can recognize the political implications of that fact as we see the farmer squeezed today between rising costs and falling prices in a manipulated market.

The solution is not to further subsidize the farmer but to cut down on aid to the nonfarmer.

It has been said — and I agree — that the true effect of the farm program has been obscured by the false prosperity created by the war and the threat of war. Many people think otherwise; they believe that the recent good years enjoyed by agriculture were due to the farm program of those years.

Surely the latter is not true, for we are almost as far from a solution to the basic problems as ever. Like the squirrel in a cage, we're on a treadmill, always in motion, but getting nowhere.

DO FARMERS honestly believe they

should be paid by Uncle Sam for farming well? Or, that they should be guaranteed a measure of success enjoyed by no other member of our society? Won't good farming pay for itself, if the farmer puts both hands to the plow, rather than having one hand outstretched toward Washington?

There is no doubt of the need for well-planned farm operations, including proper land use. Still, only about one farm out of ten is farmed with sound conservation measures in mind, simply because high price supports for crops like corn and wheat encourage a farmer to deplete his land. Such governmental intervention bribes farmers to engage in a kind of capital depletion which is known to be poor business practice.

Instead of trying to repair the old 1930 model — at best, a patchwork version of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) — why not try a new kind of farm program? Why not restore some dignity and respect to agriculture, by letting the owner and manager of each farm business plan his own program of efficient production and wise land-use? If it is vital to this nation to have a continuing abundance of food and fiber, then it seems high time that we let the planning be done by individuals who have proven their desire and their capacity to make their own way in the highly competitive business of successful farming.

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