

A Look at Agriculture in the Northeast

Guest Editorial by JARLATH HAMROCK

[This statement was written as a minority report addressed to the Northeast Agricultural Leadership Assembly. An outline of this same report has been submitted at public hearings on "Agriculture" hosted by the New York State Assembly in Binghamton, New York, 3/23/79.]

Nearly three-quarters of agriculture in the Northeast is dairy, and is supported by government at federal levels through milk marketing acts, federal milk subsidies, and school lunch programs. This support runs slightly over 80% parity for milk producers. Dairy farmers should be careful not to completely ignore the economic problems of grain farmers around the country who receive government support at less than 60% of parity, but who supplement cow feed for farmers in the dairy barns of the Northeast.

Dairy co-operatives and powerful milk lobbies in Washington work for the benefit of milk producers, but small farm policy gets inadequate attention in Congress, and among agricultural bureaucrats. Legislative reform as related to small farm policy needs the full support of state commissioners of agriculture, and representatives of private farm organizations who purport to speak for the entire farm segment.

Congress has authorized some three million dollars for research in connection with small farming in the 1977 Farm Bill. But unless responsive measures are initiated at influential levels even these meager funds may be lost in budget appropriations for fiscal year 1979.

With regard to "alternative agriculture", the USDA has finally compiled a 150-page report entitled *A Bibliography for Small and Organic Farmers, 1920-1978*. But aside from integrated pest management, which limits the use of pesticide, there is no specific funding for research allocated at USDA for this increasingly significant method of cultivation. Frederic Winthrop, Massachusetts Commissioner of Agriculture, and chairman of this assembly, recently completed a ten day tour of organic farm operations in Europe. Surely such methods are no less suitable to the Northeastern United States.

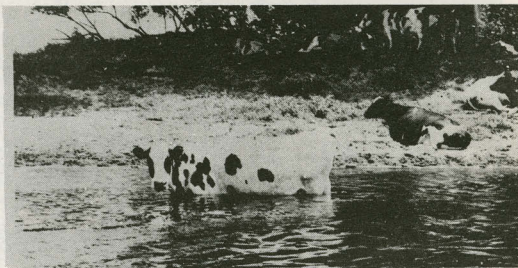
A common criticism of alternative farming supported by much of the research establishment is that it cannot produce enough food to feed the world. Former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz once suggested that "before we go back to organic agriculture in this country, somebody must decide which 50 million Americans we are going to let starve or go hungry." This way of thinking, typically, assumes an "either/or" arrangement in the whole of agriculture, and a straight-jacket approach as to method. Proponents of both conventional and alternative farming are more likely to admit that there is room for each, and that research be proportionate. It is time the agricultural establishment in the Northeast begins to take issue, and exception, with this flat departmental policy at USDA which for some reason chooses to ignore, almost entirely, the agricultural style and productivity of over 10,000 farm families.

I have submitted to the Executive Committee of this conference a summary report of Senate Judiciary Hearings entitled *Priorities in Agricultural Research at USDA* (December, 1978) and ask that this assembly take leadership in mandating Congress to authorize one million dollars in the 1981 Farm Bill for research at USDA pertaining to alternative agriculture. In an age when our non-renewable resources are being depleted in farmland production every option which presents an alternative to energy-intensive agriculture should be considered.

There is much confusion surrounding "parity," and even the USDA has begun to use "cost of production" as a substitute for measuring real farm income. But figures at USDA for the cost of production over last year show an average increase of only 1.1% though inflation runs into double digit figures. The Administration has admit-

ted that farmers are hardest hit by inflation. I ask that this Assembly calculate the average cost of production for farmers in the ten Northeast states and that the Executive Committee review these statistics.

Direct marketing between farmers and consumers offers, in most cases, higher income for farmer produce, lower prices for consumers, and fresher food for consumption. It can bridge the gap between what farmers get and what consumers have to pay for food, generating a better understanding between these two groups who, all too often, are at odds on issues surrounding high food prices. The Farmer-to-Consumer Direct Marketing Act of 1976 has proven extremely effective in researching and promoting farmers' markets across the country. Small farms, particularly, benefit from this marketing approach.



But one point which I think is often overlooked is that farmers who live in rural areas have little vote in cities and towns where these markets are located, and location is considered crucial to their success. Further support placing these markets must come from county seat and municipal offices, from city fathers and town councilmen. The Farm Bureau, many of whose members are not farmers, but small business people and merchants, should work closely with mayors and Chambers of Commerce developing farmers' markets in our cities and towns.

Finally, let me say that prior to this three-day conference I spent fifty days in Washington, D.C. investigating some of the issues behind the American Agriculture Movement. The *New York Times* called the farmers' protest "a strategic disaster," and Vermont's Senator Leahy stated at Committee Hearings on D.C. Appropriations that the recent demonstration had "hurt the cause for the farmer." It is premature to gauge the effectiveness of this conference. But I feel optimistic and hopeful that certain recommendations out of this Assembly might improve the lot of the farmer, at least in the Northeast.

But perhaps we fall short of what could develop for agriculture and rural life if we limit our perspective to region.

There is much discussion about preserving farmland. In the Northeast we are especially sensitive to this problem, and Congressman Jeffords has introduced legislation which might limit industry and development from eating up prime farm land. In the Great Plains, however, where farmers are often hard pressed from agricultural surplus and must comply with government set-aside programs and non-recourse loans in order to survive, agricultural easements may have little appeal. And yet cheap U.S. food production for world consumption and drastically low grain prices apparently are not issues in the Northeast.

Farmers are traditionally hard to organize, but they are not insensitive to national agricultural issues. Legislators and farm representatives might be wise to practice some horsetrading at Congressional levels.

In a speech at Kansas City that asked farmers to help the USDA find solutions to farm problems, Bob Bergland stated that "we must recognize the tremendous diversity within the family farm structure, and encourage and support that diversity." The chairman of this Assembly closed the conference in New Jersey pointing out "that there is strength in our diversity." In 1979, however, farmers represent less than 4% of our total population. We hope that this strength and diversity can translate into effective policy for the benefit of all farmers, and the whole of rural society.

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