Farmers, Food and Fretful Consumers

During the past year the publicity associated with agricultural scarcities and high food prices has caused a fretful population to question the capability of American agriculture to export grain and adequately produce for the nation's needs. This is an unusual situation considering that agricultural abundance has been taken for granted during the past 40 years.

The U S. has developed an agricultural system with such abundant output that it has been one of the wonders of the 20th century. In 1930 each American farm worker supplied farm products for 10 people, including himself. By 1950 the figure had increased to 15.5 persons supplied by each farm worker. Since 1950, the rate of increase has sharply accelerated, so that the number supplied by one farm worker today is approximately 51, or three times as many as 20 years ago. Twenty years ago one person out of 7 was living on a farm, but now only one person in 22 lives on a farm.

When farm productivity grew sharply in the 1950's food was not only plentiful but many products, particularly grains, were in huge surplus. Through government programs farmers were paid to remove a portion of their acreage from production in an effort to reduce overall supplies of grains. This tended to hold down productivity, but we lacked sufficient markets and North America became the grain storehouse for the world

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During this period, the U.S. was annually exporting about one-half of the soybean crop, 40 percent of the wheat, 25 percent of the corn, and 20 percent of the sorghum crop. With only 7 per-cent of the world's land mass, the U S. has more than 12 percent of the world's cultivated land and nearly 9 percent of the pastureland. In our Corn Belt, we have about half the world's farmland with long summers of adequate rainfall.

Cheap food policy

Our government's "cheap food" policy has been successful beyond all expectations. Consumers enjoy an abundance of food which, despite recent sharp price increases, still costs less than 16 percent of their disposable income. U.S. farmers have been able to produce farm commodities far above our citizens' needs and still export the production from one acre out of five in mo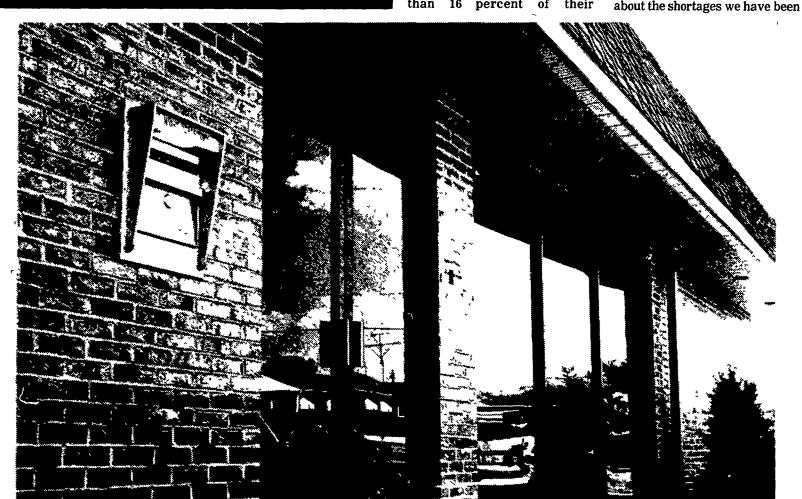st years. This year it will be one acre in four. But what about the shortages we have been hearing so much about in the past year?

Perhaps current high prices of farm commodities are due to some extent to the success of our past programs to reduce production of agricultural products, particularly grains The major cause, however, is that world food production has not kept pace with demand in recent years. There have been severe drought problems in the Soviet Union which is the world's largest wheat producer. This drought resulted in the big grain sale by the U. S. to Russia in 1972-73. There has been a sharp increase in demand for food by the other developed nations. The developed nations comprise about one-fourth of the world's population.

As personal incomes in the developed countries increase, their citizens demand a better diet (more milk, eggs, and red meat). In the world's poor countries the per capita consumption of grain is about 400 pounds per year and nearly all of it is consumed in some form of

. . . many people thought we could feed the world

The newest and nicest.