

Will There Be Food For All?

Neither the doomsayers nor the Pollyannas will walk away completely satisfied after reading *The World Food Situation and Prospects to 1985*. One of the more widely publicized studies put out by USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) in 1974, it melds the good news with the bad.

But throughout this 90-page report threads a hope that the world's less fortunate nations can fend for themselves if official policies by the world's countries are steered in the right direction by their governments.

The researchers do not dismiss reality. The fact is, problems abound in the world food picture, not the least of which are the vagaries of weather. Also, we cannot be sure that known technology in food production will be applied properly, or that new technological developments will be available when needed.

As put by the authors: "This study does not support the judgments that world food supplies per capita are likely to decline or that the growth of the world food

supply is likely to lag behind demand. Yet these possibilities cannot be ruled out.

"In view of the uncertain nature of food supplies," the authors continue, "it would seem to be wise social policy to insure against major shortages... and to be prepared to pay reasonable cost to maintain moderate stocks or reserve capacity or to absorb some surplus should they result."

Many views of the world food situation focus on immutable forces or circumstances (such as the limited surface of the earth, changed climatic patterns, or the fixed nature of consumption patterns) which are thought to be beyond the control of people.

The ERS analysis indicates, however, that much of what has happened in the development of the world food situation can be traced to government policies and basic human conditions

(such as income distribution and poverty), and suggests that governmental and individual choices will continue to be critical in the

Food stocks can provide insurance against shortrun dips in production. An important insurance against longrun shortfalls is a backlog of resources and basic and applied agricultural research, supported by policies and institutions through which research and resources can be quickly moved into the fields to increase production. Agricultural research needs to be directed especially toward the problems of increasing productivity in the developing countries where modern scientific agriculture is only beginning to be adopted.

The phenomenon of high food prices and uncertain food supplies arose out of a combination of circumstances, policy changes, and longrun development trends, which raise very important issues but which do not indicate a longrun shortage of food supplies.

Among the major impediments to increasing food production in both the development and the planned economies are policies designed to maintain low and stable food prices to consumers. These policies have dampened the farmers; incentives to produce food in some of the countries and have partly made necessary their large grain imports.

The ERS study also tries to answer these questions:

Will the real cost of food be higher in the future than in the past? It probably will be higher because certain food prices, particularly grain prices, were especially depressed during the years immediately preceding 1972, and because important food production inputs such as fertilizer will be more expensive.

Nominal food prices will also be higher because of inflation. But when food production is increased to overcome recent shortages, food costs can be expected to fall to a level considerably below present prices.

Has the world sufficient resources to continue to increase food production? There is sufficient land and raw materials for productive

inputs to greatly increase food output. How fast production will increase, and whether this increase in food production will take place mainly in the developing countries, will depend more on policy decisions than on natural forces or raw material inputs.

Will food supplies and prices continue to be unstable? This will depend partly on policies adopted with respect to food stocks. Instability in the world's weather will produce instability in the supply of food unless reserve measures are adopted. Because of the inelastic demand for food, the absence of stocks will result in major fluctuations in prices whenever the growth in supply departs much from the growth in demand.

Does "rising affluence" impose a restricted diet on the world's poor? Should consumption of livestock products be reduced to permit more basic food grains for poor people? Food consumption patterns around the world are determined by income distribution and by the type

and quantity of basic foodstuffs produced in each locality.

In the short run, if grain supplies are limited as they are now, high consumption by the affluent raises prices and thus restricts the diets of the poor. In the longer run, the price of food depends on many factors, including governments' policies, which are more important than the level of consumption of the affluent.

Are there developments in the world's climate which will limit increases in food production? There is in-

sufficient evidence to support such a conclusion, but world weather is unstable and unpredictable and the world needs to be better prepared for adversities than it has been since 1972. In the short run, such preparedness requires food stocks. In the medium term, excess resources could also help, but in the long run, it requires a backlog of technology to deal with protracted adversities that can be expected to occur.

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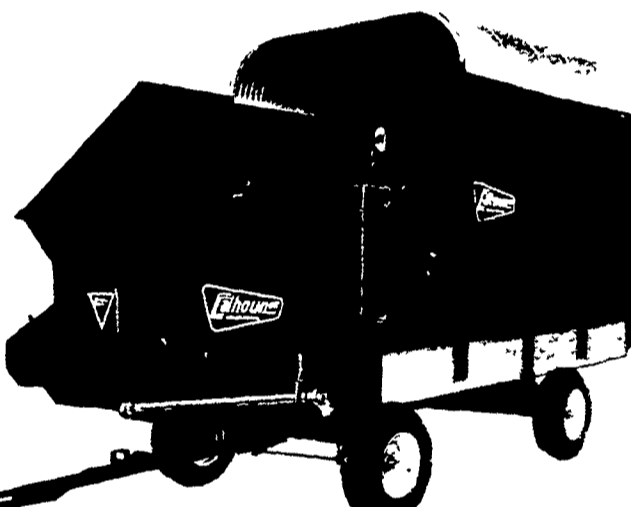
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