

Farmer cooperatives defended

WASHINGTON — Lately a lot of people have been talking about farmer cooperatives — but some food industry leaders feel that many of these people are not as knowledgeable as they might be about co-ops.

One of these leaders is Kenneth D. Naden, president of the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives. Naden wants co-ops to be recognized as key contributors to the strength of modern American agriculture, but he believes that many people will have to be educated about co-ops to achieve this recognition.

"During the past few years, the nation has been exposed to a wave of publicity about farmer cooperatives — some of it damaging," Naden said recently. "As a result, some people may have questionable attitudes about co-ops, even though only a few of them actually understand what a co-op is and how it works."

"It's true that today's food prices, along with adverse publicity about a few dairy cooperatives, have contributed to an image problem that farmers and their cooperatives must deal with," he added. "But co-ops have done far more for the good of the country than they're given credit for. It's the severely limited knowledge and understanding that Americans have of co-ops and co-op activities that does the most damage."

To Naden, the tendency of people to view a co-op as "just another big corporation" is one of the worst misconceptions cooperatives face today — and one that informed opinion can change.

"When people put co-ops into the same category with

businesses like GM, Exxon or Borden's, they lost sight of the features that set co-ops apart from conventional corporations," Naden stated. "They overlook the fact that co-ops are self-help enterprises that help keep the independent family farmer in business."

"We should all be concerned about the fate of the family farmer," Naden said. "He has proven to be the most efficient producer of food the world has ever seen. If it weren't for that efficiency, we'd be paying a lot more for our food, and there'd be less food available."

"Co-ops are owned and



Ken Naden governed democratically by farmers themselves, not by a group of outside investors."

he continued. "They're non-profit organizations that operate at cost; returns on capital invested to establish a cooperative are very limited."

The NCFC president also indicated that while farmer-members do receive refunds proportionate to individual participation after expenses, their biggest benefits are those realized by working together in an organized

manner to fulfill common needs.

What do farmers get from co-op membership in place of high profits? A secure market for their products, according to Naden.

"For small farmers, the phrase 'the future is now' is meaningless," Naden said. "Because of the size of their investments in land and machinery, they have to be able to plan their crops and

herds long in advance — and hope that there's a market for these items at harvest time. If they sell their products to non co-op food companies, they can never be completely sure of a market; the company can stop buying and look elsewhere at any time, without warning.

"Co-ops provide a market where farmers' crops can be

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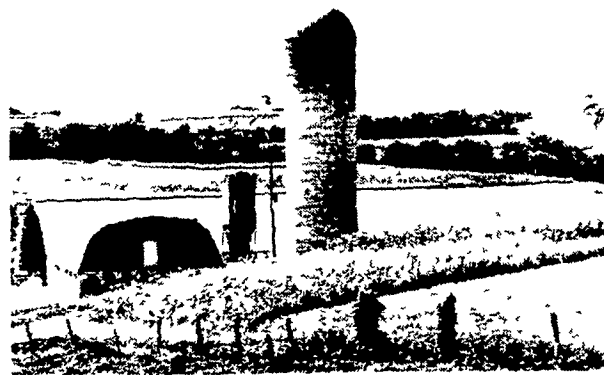
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