

McHale answers his critics

Too much research to aid rural people and not enough to increase farm production. That's the gist, I take it, of criticism leveled against my tenure as Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture.

Calling me a welfare secretary instead of an agriculture secretary is an effective way to knock me in rural communities where welfare is a loaded word. Unfortunately, the real issues get obscured when everyone begins shouting welfare.

Permit me to set the record straight in these closing days. I never said I wanted rural people to exist on doles. Welfare handouts are a last resort that no one wishes on another.

I said rural communities have become populated with ex-farmers. I said let's not forget these hard working men who were driven off their farms by harsh economic circumstances. Let's find a way to employ them, to revive an unhealthy business climate. Call me an employment or a business secretary if agriculture secretary hurts too much.

I also said that most farmers fortunate enough still to be farming were in danger of going under. I said a government that traditionally has bailed out large industrial corporations certainly could offer some protection to the small farmer-businessman.

Was I whistling in the dark? Was the danger to small farmers real or imagined? Let's look at some facts.

In a report to the Congress prepared in August of this year by the Comptroller General of the United States - a report that is available in my office in case anyone wants to verify the accuracy of this column - the small farmer is depicted to be in economic trouble.

The report plainly asserts that "although some publicly supported extension and research projects have related to the needs of small farm operators, the department (USDA) and land grant colleges have not made a concerted effort to solve problems impeding the economic improvement of small farm operations.

Also, they have not adequately evaluated the economic and social impacts of production-efficiency that small farm operators need to plan for and adjust to changes brought about by such research."

In a nutshell, the weight of federally supported agriculture research projects has been to increase farm production. This in turn has kept farm prices at about the same level over the years though farm costs have soared. Small farmers unable to assimilate new technology to increase their production fell by the wayside.

According to the report, the number of farms in the United States has steadily declined since 1935. From 1950 to 1975, for example, the number of farms decreased about 50 percent.

What happened? According to the report, the spread between prices farmers receive and prices they pay has always been too wide.

Prices received for farm products increased 83 percent from 1953 through 1974, with 50 percent of the increase occurring just in 1973. Meanwhile prices paid for farm input items increased 113 percent and prices paid for family living items increased 92 percent.

As the report sums it up, "because prices farmers received for sale of commodities have not kept pace with prices they paid for farm supplies and materials and family living items and because the real value of the dollar has continued to

decline, farmers must use new or improved technology to increase their output just to maintain stable incomes."

Expressed in a more dramatic way, one agricultural economist has stated that "the cycle of introduction of new technology, adoption by farmers, increased output, depressed prices, and further search for new technology to maintain farm income has placed farmers on a treadmill."

What should be done? The report says USDA and the land grant colleges should intensify their efforts to give training and technical assistance to small farm operators. The objective should be to create a better life for these farmers and increase the productivity of the land under their management.

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After skiing, skating or sledding, appetites are apt to run high but enthusiasm for cooking may be low. With easy Taco Dogs, in 15 minutes you can have a quick hearty meal on the table. Wrap skinless franks in a taco shell. Season with prepared Mexican flavored taco sauce, top with shredded Cheddar or Monterey Jack cheese. Bake until cheese is melted.

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Longwood Gardens offers short courses

Longwood Gardens still has room for students in two of its winter-spring horticultural short courses; Bonsai for Beginners and Vegetables. The bonsai course will meet on Tuesdays, February 17 and 24, and March 2 and 9, from 9:30 to 11:00 a.m. Mr. Mark Pongonis, grower in charge of Longwood's popular bonsai collection, will discuss the history and basic techniques of bonsai, including selection of plant materials and containers, soil mixtures and planting, pruning, and general day-to-day care. Registration for the course is \$15.00 and will be open through January 23.

The vegetable course will meet on Thursdays for six consecutive weeks, from February 12 through March 18. Two sections of the course are offered, one meeting from 9:30 to 11:00 a.m., the other from 7:30 to 9:00 p.m. Mr. David Foresman, instructor in Longwood's Department of Education, will discuss soil

conditioning, vegetable variety selection, planting, fertilizing, and pest control. Registration for this course is \$20.00 and will also close on January 23.

For further information on registration procedures, write the Department of Education, Longwood Gardens, Kennett Square, Pa., 19348, or call 215-388-6741, ext. 237.

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Be a wise consumer when shopping for sausage products. Select packages that provide a full view of the product and read labels carefully. Label information should include: name of the product, list of ingredients in descending order of amounts used, weight in pounds and - or ounces, names and address of manufacturer or distributor, a government inspection stamp and instructions for storage and-or preparation.

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