

USDA structure hearings to set farm policy

BY CURT HARLER
HARRISBURG — "A dog and pony show" is how one Northeastern Agriculture official termed the hearings U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland says will determine the future of American farming in years to come.

The hearings, called A Dialogue on American Agriculture, are supposed to provide USDA with information about the current structure of agriculture and the forces which affect it.

The goal of the sessions is to establish national policies and programs that will best promote the kind of agriculture and rural life Americans want for the future, USDA says.

In all, ten sessions are scheduled. The sessions will be attended by Bergland and other officials of USDA.

Farmers are being encouraged by USDA to attend the sessions and make their feelings on a variety of issues known to the Secretary.

But a number of questions have been raised about the meetings which are scheduled for late November and December.

One of the prime considerations is the screening process going on before

anyone will be allowed to speak at the sessions.

The screening will allow USDA officials to determine ahead of time who will be allowed to make public statements at the meetings, although written statements of any type can be presented for the record.

Subject matter areas also will be screened.

Other observers question the location of the meetings—all but two are being held in towns which, at best, feature second-rate transportation facilities.

Even for those driving to the hearings, some locations are notably inconvenient.

Farmers who do get to the meetings will be given five minutes to present their cases. Early indications are that each farmer will share the microphone with four other farmers.

After each gives his short talk Secretary Bergland and the other USDA officials may ask questions pertaining to the talk.

It will be farmers, for the most part, who will be speaking.

USDA is attempting to weed out any potential representative of the state agriculture departments, governmental agencies, Grange, Farm Bureau, National Farmers

Organization or other organizations, Structure Committee members say.

The Committee says Bergland feels such groups have enough opportunity to make input on their own.

USDA says it primarily is interested in hearing testimony from family farmers.

Bergland says he has three goals for the hearings. First is to generate a greater public awareness of the problems of agriculture.

Not only must we treat specific problems, but we must also recognize there are broader related problems, Bergland says.

His second goal is to obtain the views of interested people—to invite recommendations on whatever policy changes may be considered, he says.

Third goal of the hearings is to gather reliable material to help shape the 1981 farm bill.

"My goal is to involve the people, all the people, and not to leave writing of that Farm Bill to the lobbyists and a few influential legislators," Bergland says.

Despite Bergland's statements, Gil Parker, a Vermont Department of Agriculture official says, "The deck is stacked as far as I'm concerned."

The Northeastern regional Dialogue sessions are scheduled to be held in Vermont. Farmers from anywhere north of the Mason-Dixon line will give testimony there.

Parker says Bergland has identified his areas of concern and is limiting the discussion to areas USDA has some flexibility on.

There are 12 areas on which USDA will allow discussion.

These include: land ownership, control and tenancy; barriers to entering and leaving farming; production efficiency, size of farms, and the role of technology; government programs; tax and credit policies; farm input supply system; farm product marketing system; present and future energy supplies; environmental concerns including soil and water conservation; returns to farmers; costs to consumers; and quality of life in rural areas.

While he has invited comment on any of these areas, Bergland adds, "We have to be realistic about the constraints on public policy, of course."

"And we can't forget for

one minute that inflation is the overriding economic problem in the country today. Our actions can not feed inflation."

But, he added, even allowing for those limitations he feels there is plenty of room to develop policy alternatives.

Politically, the main purpose of the hearings appears to be to get the Carter administration on firm ground with regards to the 1981 farm bill.

The hearings are in keeping with the Carter Administration's policy of getting down to the grassroots when considering legislation or policy.

Still, agriculture officials elsewhere in the Northeast speculate that the exclusion of many of those groups, organizations and officials who are closest to current ag policy may be to prevent dissident waves at the public hearings.

What would happen if a firebrand like Fred Winthrop of Massachusetts' Agriculture Department were to get on the stand? a Pennsylvania ag official asks.

Winthrop, a liberal Democrat, has made waves

in his own state and would seem unlikely to have qualms about taking on USDA.

Other ag commissioners like Gus Douglass of West Virginia have not hesitated to take on their own bosses, the state governors.

New Jersey's Phil Alampi has demonstrated his independence of any predetermined political ties by serving several administrations, Republican and Democratic, as head of the state agriculture department.

Of course, USDA will accept written testimony from anyone who takes the time to mail it to USDA. But the likelihood of a public upheaval is minimized since it is not probable many people or reporters will go through the files of letters to see who said what.

Comments can be sent to Project Coordinator, Structure of Agriculture, USDA, Washington, D.C. 20250.

Sending comments in may be an individual farmer's best bet. The meeting locations certainly were not chosen with easy access in mind.

Continued next week

Marketing official named at USDA

WASHINGTON, D.C. - James L. Pearson, has been named director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture division which conducts research into ways of improving marketing facilities, equipment, practices, and methods of distributing food and other farm products.

Pearson will head the Market Research and Development Division of USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service. The division administers the Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program,

which provides matching-funds grants to states.

In 1965, he joined USDA's Economic Research Service (now Economics, Statistics and Cooperatives Service) as an agricultural economist in the Gainesville, Fla., office. He was in charge of the ERS office in Gainesville, from 1966 to 1974. During that time, he organized and led research into economic problem areas of the fruit and vegetable industry.

He came to Washington, D.C. in 1975 as deputy director of ERS's Com-

modity Economics Division, a position he held until 1976. From 1976 until the present, he has been deputy director of the National Economic Analysis Division of ESCS.

Pearson has served as an agricultural marketing consultant to the Republic of Panama, and in 1973 he traveled to Vietnam as part of a team of researchers evaluating the role of agriculture in that country's economic development.

He recently served as a staff economist on USDA's Meat Pricing Task Force.

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