



Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

The American farmer is at least as patriotic as the average guy, so don't be too quick to jump on him when he cries the blues about the Russian grain embargo.

Whether Russia buys grain from the United States doesn't mean a whole lot to the typical man on the street. If he thinks that causes food prices to go up, then he complains bitterly about his food going to some Communist. If he thinks the embargo will make his food prices cheaper, then he's in favor of it and it has nothing to do with patriotism.

The American farmer is much more involved.

He's worked hard all year battling the elements, the energy crisis, inflation and whatever else, trying to bring in a successful crop. Now, suddenly his market is messed up. Sure, Uncle Sam is going to buy up grain to ease the burden and other actions are being taken.

Meanwhile, grain markets have dropped dramatically since President Carter's announcement, the futures market is cloudy, and there's a big cloud of gloom hanging over agriculture.

Foreign markets are important to American agriculture. Farmers depend on them. Whose fault is that? Well at least some of it has to be Uncle Sam's.

Historically, the American farmer has always been able to produce a little bit more than American consumers need.

Going back 50 years or more, we've talked about the farm problem, which in a few words boils down to too much production or not enough demand.

At the start of the decade just ended, Uncle Sam held huge stocks of grain. Stocks that had been slowly building over a lot of years in spite of our government's and private traders' best efforts to sell that extra produce in the world market.

Then in the early seventies there were some crop failures around the world and a food crisis sprang up. The Soviets and a bunch of other nations came to us with checkbooks in hand, looking for food. We had the food, they had the money, and so deals were made.

Pretty soon the surpluses were gone. The grain bins were dismantled and prices went up. That's when that era's secretary of agriculture urged farmers to plant "from fence row to fence row". Answering that request and responding to greatly improved prices, American farmers did just about that.

Things went along fine for a few years with the world market cleaning up our annual surplus. By 1976, however, supplies were starting to get out of balance again and government programs were once again enacted to boost sagging grain prices.

Farmers picketed and paraded and tightened their

belts, and did what they could to make a dollar or two in a very high risk and difficult game of farming.

And now out of the blue comes an announcement in response to a threatening situation in Afghanistan that pulls the rug right out from under the American farmer.

The few dollars profit those grain farmers were planning on now look like huge losses and there is a great aura of uncertainty as we approach another cropping year.

Uncle Sam says he'll buy up surplus grain so farmers and grain traders won't be stuck. But what's he going to do with it?

A bushel of corn sold to Russia and fed to a Russian steer is gone forever. But a bushel of corn sold to Uncle Sam continues to be a factor in the market.

Unless Uncle plans to burn it or bury it that grain lies around, continuing to dampen future prospects. If he gives it to needy nations, he may be satisfying a market that might have otherwise bought American grain.

Even if he turns it into fuel, he weakens a market that farmers were hoping might be their salvation. There's just no question in my mind that government-owned grain continues to influence the American grain market long after the deals have all been made.

The whole question of a grain embargo was made academic the other day when the longshoremen said they wouldn't ship it anyway. And that further emphasizes the precarious position the American farmer finds himself in.

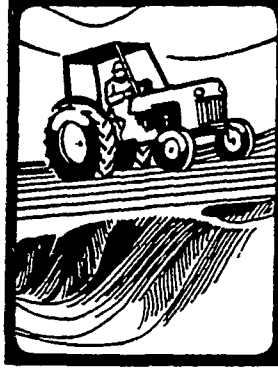
When the longshoremen say they won't load it, it doesn't make any difference what anybody else says, up to and including our President.

This is a difficult time for everyone—our President, our State Department, our military, and yes, even our farmers. For they are part of

a political war—one which they want no part of and yet they have no choice.

There must be a lesson in all this for farmers, but I can't seem to sort out just what it is.

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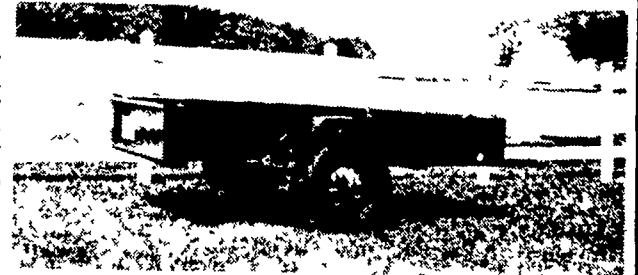
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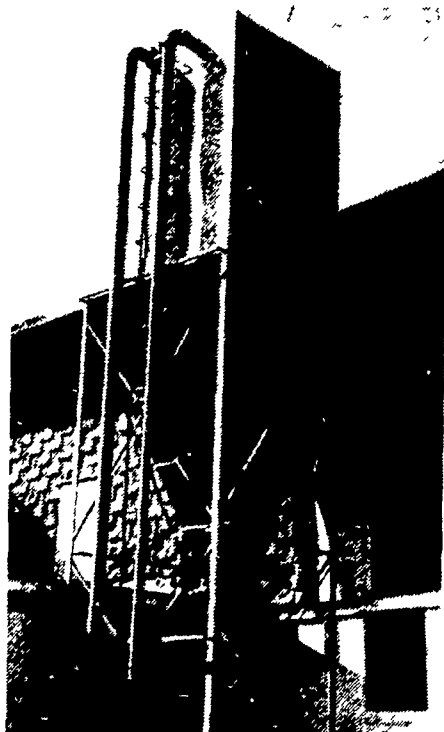


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