



Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Everyone agrees that farmland is a precious natural resource and that it must be preserved, and that's about as far as the agreement goes. From there we take off in all directions trying to devise methods for farmland preservation that will save the land and not bother anybody.

So far, we've been totally unsuccessful.

If you look back in U.S. agricultural history only two hundred years, you find fewer than four million settlers scratching out a living on a rough, rocky New England farms while the nation's vast plains and productive deltas lay idle. Preserving farmland wasn't a consideration since the settled area extended westward an average of only 255 miles.

During those years settlers were creating farmland with their hands and horsepower and what simple tools were available. They were pulling stumps, moving rocks, turning the tough virgin sod, and otherwise making farms.

Gradually the settlers pushed westward, setting up farms as they

went, until some time in the 1800's when most usable land had been claimed. But even then the nation's agricultural base was expanding as more acres came under the plow through land clearing, drainage, irrigation, and other techniques that permitted farmers to fill otherwise idle acres.

There was still plenty of room for agricultural expansion, and there was certainly no shortage of food. And so American agriculture entered the 20th Century in what is described by many historians as the golden age of agriculture - productive family farms, favorable farm prices and a way of life that is still considered by many to be how agriculture should be.

Three-quarters of a century and many millions of people later, farmers are still expanding their acres. But they're fighting a losing battle.

In the meantime, they sold their horses, making more grassland available to the plow. They concentrated livestock into pens and buildings, freeing up more acres. They continued to clear and drain

and irrigate, making even more acres available.

While all that was going on, other forces were at work - highway planners, urban developers, land speculators and home builders, all of them seeking land for nontarm use.

At first it wasn't a big deal - a few acres here, a few more acres there as a city grew - a few more acres to build a turnpike or a parking lot. It didn't really matter because there was plenty of land.

But like so many of our precious resources, our supply of available agricultural land is running out. It won't happen today or tomorrow and perhaps not in our lifetimes, but at the present rate of loss, it will happen.

We will reach a point where America can no longer produce enough food to take care of its own people, and then we will be dependent on some other nation for our most basic need.

That doesn't have to happen, but it will unless somebody on a national level decides that farmland is truly a precious natural resource that must be preserved above all else.

It's easy for the planners of the future to plot their urban sprawl and highway systems, and to concern themselves with the wants and needs of 200 million people in the vast megalopolises that will evolve. But where are they going to get their food?

Already there are states that are net importers of food. That is to say, they consume more agricultural goods than they produce. That has to be a concern. A state boundary is not that critical, but the concept is. When a state has allowed its urban pressures to overwhelm its agricultural productivity, it has a

problem.

A state that through the years has valued nonfarm development at the expense of farmland but now finds itself a food importer, has to question the wisdom of what happened, because only a few hundred years ago there were no urban states. There weren't even agricultural states. They were just parts of a vast wilderness until early settlers decided to call them states and stake out boundaries and make laws that permitted or encouraged or failed to control urban development.

Obviously, it's too late to reverse the urbanization of states like New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island, but it's not too late to save the rest. This nation still has excess farm capacity as one acre in four produces for a foreign consumer. Perhaps an abundant food supply has lulled consumers into the false thinking that our agricultural capacity will always stay ahead of our needs.

We used to produce as much oil as we needed, and that was only a few years ago. We used to produce as much of a lot of things as we needed and now we import from around the world. We still produce more food than we need and we should keep it that way through a comprehensive, national plan that stabilizes our agricultural base at a pre-determined level and holds it there forever.

We really have no choice in the matter but to preserve agricultural land somewhere down the line. We either do it now when it's already overdue or we do it later when it will be too late.

It's time for the American people, farm and nonfarm alike, to recognize the importance of the nation's agricultural base and the dire consequences if it fails to maintain that base.

I don't think we can wait until we are a food importing nation to start some kind of national land preservation program.

Senator pushes plan to boost farm exports

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Senator Roger Jepsen of Iowa is pushing for Congress to take the first step toward a significant boost in U.S. farm exports.

"The future of our agricultural economy and our economy in general rests heavily on our success in the world marketplace," Jepsen said. "This is especially important today when the United States is suffering from a large balance of trade deficit."

The bill would set up the framework for a revolving credit fund within the Community Credit Corporation to finance agricultural export ventures. The revolving fund would allow one of the CCC's most successful programs to recycle its loan money, rather than paying it back to the Treasury and then having to request a yearly appropriation.

However, because of the budget

crunch, Jepsen said he will not request money for the fund at this time.

This export loan program has proven itself over the past 25 years, consistently returning more money to the Treasury than it receives.

Currently, agricultural products account for more than 20 percent of total American exports. However, little has been done to implement the energetic financing provisions of the two-year-old Agricultural Trade Act.

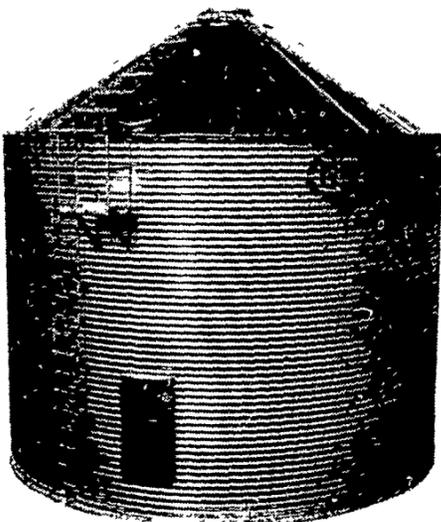
"There is strong evidence that limitations in the current export financing program have cost the U.S. export sales to a number of countries," Jepsen said. "A revolving fund will provide a flexibility which is consistent with our aggressive agricultural export policy."

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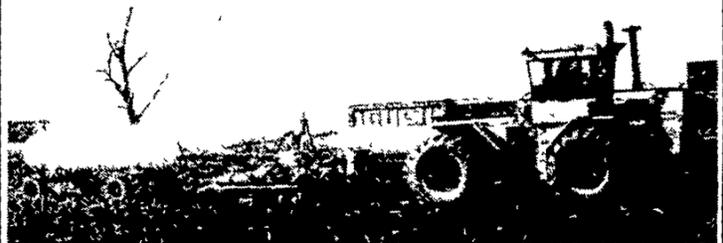
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