



Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Let them eat meat

As the world rushes toward overpopulation and eventual starvation, a lot of pressure is being generated to drastically change or even eliminate animal agriculture.

The thought behind this is that animals are inefficient users of protein. And instead of pushing a lot of feed grain through steers, pigs and chickens, we should grow food crops that can be consumed directly by people.

We may come to that eventually — before we starve, we'll make many changes in our eating habits — but don't expect Americans to stop eating meat any time soon. In fact, don't expect them to stop until they are forced by price, scarcity or some other overwhelming factor. Consumers won't stop eating meat out of a feeling of guilt or of compassion for hungry people in other lands.

Let's face it — most of us like meat and we're not about to survive on soybeans and granola while we still have all the other

vestiges of the good life. And long as we pay such a small chunk of the weekly paycheck for meat, we'll keep on buying.

As you look at some other countries — notably Japan, you realize how much people are willing to pay for the kinds of food they enjoy. It will take more than a long-range, loosely defined world need to cause any noticeable shifting from meat to plant products.

There's another side to the story, that of the producer. A substantial number of American farmers raise meat animals as part of their operations. To suddenly stop producing them would be economic disaster for those farmers.

You see, American farmers already grow much more grain than we use in this country. Until recent years, it's been very difficult to get rid of this excess. To stop producing meat animals would increase the supply of grain available without a corresponding

demand and that would wreck prices.

People who are asking for such a shift really don't understand this or maybe don't even care. They simply look at the world population figures and moralize about animal agriculture.

Another factor that I don't think is being considered is how much of America's farmland is totally unsuited to crop production. Millions of acres in the West can't be irrigated, will never be irrigated, and consequently will never support crop production. Vast areas in the East won't support crop production. This land is either too steep or too wet or too

rough or for some other reason can't be cultivated.

Granted there are a lot more acres that could be growing food and feed crops. There are also millions of acres that will never be tilled but that are quite capable of supporting livestock.

Visiting a farm in Pennsylvania recently, I was reminded of the place of animal agriculture. Even though the fellow farms more than 500 acres, he tills no more than a couple of hundred. The rest is pasture, woods, steep valleys and other wasteland that can't be effectively farmed.

Soil erosion is a constant threat on virtually every acre and must

be dealt with constantly. Open fields are broken up into strips of corn, soybeans, alfalfa and grassland. Crops are rotated to help prevent erosion, and no-till planting is the rule on most acres. Even with all of the technology that's available, soil washes away and must be continually repaired.

To ask this farmer to sell his livestock and grow food crops would be stupid. Through careful management he grows all the crops he can, which he then feeds to his livestock. He plans for enough livestock to utilize the grassland. If he runs short he can

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