

# Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

"Will There Be Enough Food?" That's the title of the 1981 Yearbook of Agriculture produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It's a question of vital concern to many millions of Americans and to a growing population around the world. It's a question that's not easily answered.

In 344 pages, a variety of yearbook writers have pondered the question, some pointing out the harsh realities of our agricultural history and others looking forward to new agricultural successes. The yearbook covers a number of agricultural concerns, including the loss of prime farmland, whether agricultural productivity is leveling off, the problem of soil erosion, the diversion of agricultural resources from food production to meet energy requirements, increased water and soil pollution and food shortfalls around the world.

In introducing the new yearbook recently in Washington, Secretary of Agriculture John Block said the subject of the yearbook, "Will There Be Enough Food?" is more than one simple question. He posed a variety of questions.

Can American farmers continue to meet our needs and help ease hunger around the world? Will our food production system continue to provide more paychecks for Americans than any other industry? Will farm exports continue to pay for one-fourth or more of our imports each year? Block said the information in the yearbook represents the considered viewpoints of many authors, with

no effort being made towards a pre-determined answer.

Block told his Washington guests that he thinks American farmers will provide ample food products needed by the nation's population for the foreseeable future. But he pointed to two main clouds that might threaten that situation.

The first, the problem of maintaining the nation's natural resource base with emphasis on revitalizing soil conservation programs. The second, protecting and strengthening agricultural research.

Block said the world is increasing its dependence on American farmers. He expects them to be providing 15 percent of the world's agricultural supplies by 1985. Compare that with only two percent in the early '50s, and only 11 percent a couple of years ago. To do this he says, U.S. farm exports will have to increase as much as eight percent a year.

The yearbook ceremony was primarily a media event, aimed at gaining as much attention as possible for the publication. Through good luck or good planning, the secretary had the perfect backdrop for his introduction speech—a year's supply of food for a family of four. There it was, all stacked up in boxes and bags, bottles and plastic containers—5,446 pounds of food, with a retail value of slightly more than \$5,000.

The backdrop was an old idea updated and brought sharply into focus by the title of the yearbook. "Will There Be Enough Food?" When you see how much food it

takes four people for a year, it makes you wonder.

The idea of a display of a year's supply of food was first pulled together in 1951 by an A&P supermarket in Cleveland. The DuPont Company, working with Safeway stores, updated it a few years back and was responsible for getting it all together again for 1981.

Standing in front of that agricultural abundance, Block discussed the importance of American agriculture around the world and the department's commitment to insuring a continuing supply of healthy wholesome food at a reasonable price.

It was interesting to note what the big-time media folks wanted to talk about. Block was there to introduce his yearbook and talk about agriculture's commitment to the future. But the media folks wanted to look for scandal.

They wanted to know if the yearbook of agriculture was necessary. They wondered how many food stamps could have been issued instead of the yearbook. They worried about what was going to happen to that huge display of food, once the TV cameras stopped rolling. And they wanted to know who paid the bill for the media event they were participating in.

I guess John Block is used to that kind of questioning. He kept his cool and gave sensible answers without being drawn into a debate that would have put him on the six o'clock news. He said the yearbook was a tradition that he felt was important, that it provided good useful information to lots of people, and that he planned to continue it even though it did cost quite a bit. He said the question, "Will There Be Enough Food?" is one that all Americans need to consider and that the yearbook will help them do that.

He also said the media event didn't really cost the taxpayers anything, since the bill for most of the activity, including the food display, was being picked up by the DuPont Company and Safeway. And he also pointed out that once the event was over, the food was going to be donated to the Capital Area Food Bank. One reporter even wanted to quarrel with that, since firms that donate to food banks, get a tax write-off.

I came away from that gathering convinced that agriculture has a tremendous story, but we're going to have a tough time telling it. It was obvious to me that the media present wasn't really interested in the Yearbook of Agriculture and what it said and the issue that it raises. They wanted to find some headlines and they wanted to look for waste of taxpayer money.

I sincerely doubt that any of them knew anything about agriculture to ask meaningful questions about it, so instead they focused on what they did know about—waste in government. Therein lies a message for the agricultural community.

The big city media doesn't understand agriculture, and as a result isn't going to give it coverage. They'll either ignore it because they don't think what agriculture folks are doing is important, or they'll distort what is said because they don't understand it. Or they'll look for a scandal.

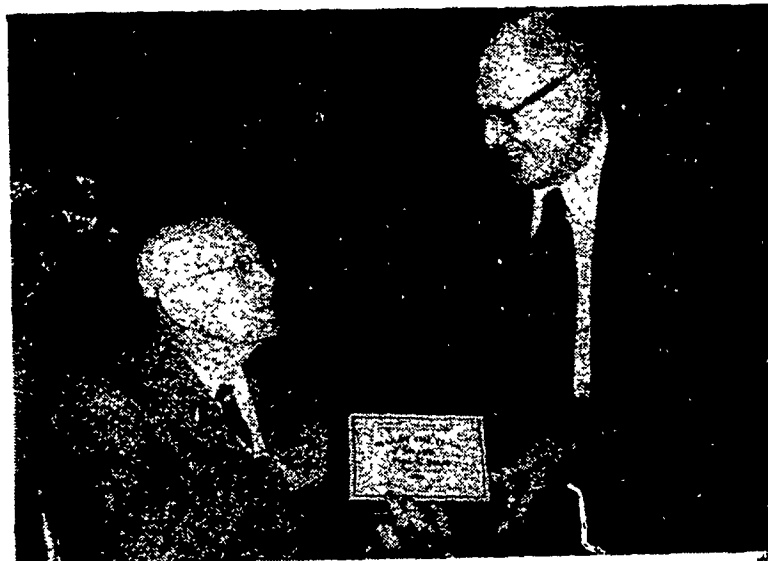
And if there isn't a scandal, then there probably won't be much coverage.

That's a fairly broad indictment and I suppose it isn't fair to all big city media folks. Perhaps some do understand agriculture, but their concerns at the yearbook ceremony didn't show it.

There may be waste in government, even some in the Department of Agriculture, but after scanning the 1981 Yearbook of Agriculture and pondering its topic, "Will There Be Enough Food?" I don't think we can categorize it as a waste.

As a footnote, I might add that the yearbooks of agriculture over the years have become classics, even collector's items, cherished by their owners for their content. I can recall one or two that weren't that great, but most of them are worthy of publication, and I think the 1981 yearbook will be classified as one of the really good ones. Copies are available for \$7 from the Superintendent of Documents, Washington, D.C. 20402. You might be able to get a free copy by writing your congressman.

## Society honors Bamer



Frank G. Bamer, left, retired chairman of Agronomy Extension at Penn State, is honored as "Man of the Year" by the Pennsylvania Plant Food and Protectant Educational Society. Making the presentation is William Gerhart, of State College, representative of American Cyanamid Company and member of the awards committee. During a quarter century at Penn State, Bamer developed fertilizer and seed recommendations that evolved into the Agronomy Guide and started district and state hay shows.

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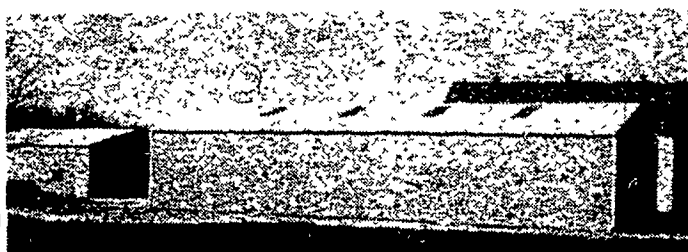
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