



Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

America's farmers are just too darn productive for their own good. That's all there is to it. They produce more food than American consumers need, more even than can be sold profitably in world markets. They suffer the consequences of their own productivity.

Right now, farmers are going through a very difficult period with high costs for inputs and low prices for outputs. So what's new about that? Any farmer with a few years of experience can look back to many periods of cost-price squeeze and difficult times. You have to look a long way to find a time when farmers weren't a little too productive for their own good.

Sure there have been food shortages in this country. The Pilgrims had a problem until the Indians taught them how to farm. There were food shortages during wars and in certain geographical areas where the lines of supply had been stretched too far. But, in general, and especially after the

agricultural revolution of the 1800s, there's always been enough to eat. And as far back as most of us can remember, there has been surplus.

For at least the last half-century farmers have produced more food than was really needed in this country. In fact, it took the expansion of world markets to cure some of the tremendous over-supply problems that plagued agriculture since the Depression. Too much grain, too many dairy products, too much cotton, and on down the list of agricultural commodities. Those world customers have grown steadily since the end of World War II to the point where they are multibillion-dollar accounts, to a time when one in four U.S. farm acres is producing for a foreign customer, to a time when agricultural exports are the shining star in this nation's foreign trade program.

And still farmers are plagued with overproduction. They're producing too many hogs and hog

prices are down. They're producing too much beef and beef prices are down. There's too much corn, soybeans, wheat, mushrooms, milk, broilers, turkeys — in fact, what agricultural commodity can you think of that is in short supply? Except perhaps the frost-damaged fruits and vegetables of Florida that we have grown to expect on a year-round basis.

I'm not sure what reward farmers expect for this agricultural miracle except a decent standard of living and a fair return on their investments. But they're not getting that. Over the past several years, a number of farm commodities have been losers and now it appears that the biggies of farm commodities — corn, soybeans, beef and pork — are all losers at the same time. And this is putting unbearable pressure on many farmers.

Some observers are predicting near crisis in some areas of the country where big-time, seemingly smart and well-financed farmers are struggling to meet the obligations of another year. Lending institutions are taking hard looks at long-time customers who are slipping further and further into the hole. The Department of Agriculture is rethinking its loan policies through the Farmers Home Administration and is encouraging its loan officers to go the extra mile if there's any chance that a farmer can hang on and eventually become successful. The nation's farm debt is at record proportions and has doubled in the last five years.

It's no overstatement to say that in general farmers are in trouble and it doesn't look as though anything miraculous will happen

to turn it all around. Pork producers are cutting back on their output slowly, and eventually that will have some effect. Beef men are doing the same thing, but it takes time. But corn and soybean growers won't leave idle acres. They're set up with big equipment to farm big acreages and you can bet the survivors will be right back out there this spring planting every possible acre in something. And you can be sure they'll grow more

produce than American consumers will need, perhaps even more than the world market can buy.

There are some signs of improvement for 1982. Some leading economists expect things to get better late in the year. But barring a crop disaster in South America, Russia or some other big country, American farmers are looking at pretty dim prospects as they gear up for the 1982 season.

Hallowell on Nat'l Advisory Council

HARRISBURG — State Agriculture Secretary Penrose Hallowell has been named to the National Advisory Council on Rural Development by U.S. Agriculture Secretary John Block. The Council held its first meeting on Wednesday and Thursday in Washington, D.C.

Block cited Hallowell's knowledge and abilities in the rural development area in making the appointment. He said, "Your presence on the Council will contribute greatly to the successful completion of its important work."

The formation of the Council was announced in October 1981. According to USDA officials, the Council will assist in identifying rural problems and supporting Administration efforts and initiatives in rural development. The Council will also provide state, local and general rural development interests with a forum for

discussing important rural issues.

Hallowell said he had accepted the appointment because its goals and objectives are in concert with those of the Thornburgh administration.

"Economic development has been a priority in Pennsylvania for the past three years," he said. "And the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture has been focusing its efforts on economic development of the state's rural community."

"The National Advisory Council on Rural Development will not only provide us with information important to coordinating state and federal programs to benefit rural Pennsylvania, but will also give Pennsylvania's rural development concerns an opportunity to have their interests aired in Washington," Hallowell said.



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