

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

No tears as giants fall

Some farms have failed during the past few months and no doubt a lot more will go before the agricultural economy picks up again. And some farmers may be able to hang on just because their lenders are reluctant to shove them out.

Times are tough on the farm, there's no doubt about that. But it's hard to paint all farmers with the same brush. For some, this economic squeeze is unbearable; for others it is little more than an inconvenience.

Se when you hear someone say that farmers are in trouble, you should ask some questions. Some farmers are in trouble. Some aren't.

Financial ups and downs are nothing new to farmers. Any of them more than 50 years old remember the really hard times of the Depression, the boom years surrounding World War II, and the surplus-building period of the sixties. Even the younger ones know that farming has good years and bad — they just weren't expecting so many bad ones. And especially, they weren't expecting

so many commodities to be in a down cycle at the same time

The consensus among agricultural economists seems to point to the big gamblers as the ones most vulnerable right now. It has little to do with size of operation, age of farmer or type of farming.

Rather, it seems to be more a matter of how long a fellow has been farming and how big a chance he's willing to take.

The fellow who started in the boom years of the mid-seventies, who borrowed every dime he could get every year since then and who has grown by leaps and bounds, is probably in trouble right now. He took a big chance and he may suffer a big loss.

A more conservative farmer who started 10 or 20 years earlier paid off his low-interest mortgage with hard-earned dollars and who has been unwilling to take bold steps is probably still farming a pretty small operation, but he's solvent and in no danger of going under.

Successful Farming magazine ran some stories recently about some of the high rollers of the

seventies who are now in big trouble. You should read the reactions in a subsequent magazine from some of their more conservative counterparts.

"The only thing those men have in common is greed," wrote a South Dakota farm wife. "They didn't need to control that much land to start with, and I personally hope they do go under," she said.

A Vermont farmer reacted this way: "You make no mention of any concern they might have had that continuous gains in production would eventually, if repeated often enough and by enough of their admirers, glut the market. They seem to have operated with a belief that they had a right to market at a profit every pound they could produce."

There's a lot of farm policy frustration in that last sentence. Perhaps most farmers do feel they have a right to sell all they produce at a profit, but they're finding that Uncle Sam doesn't see it exactly that way. The cries for parity have gone unanswered and farmers have been left in the difficult position of producing more and more and getting less and less for it.

It's no secret that some of the older, well-established, more conservative and probably small farmers, are standing around waiting for some of these giants to fall. They enjoyed farming when it

was more of a family affair. They're not gloating over the demise of another farmer, but they are made to feel a little more secure in their judgment process when it happens.

Large farms are a fact of life in American agriculture even if some of them are in financial trouble. Nobody doubts that. But lots of folks, including farm policy makers, are beginning to doubt the wisdom of the all-out, go-for-broke philosophy that has dominated farming since the mid-seventies.

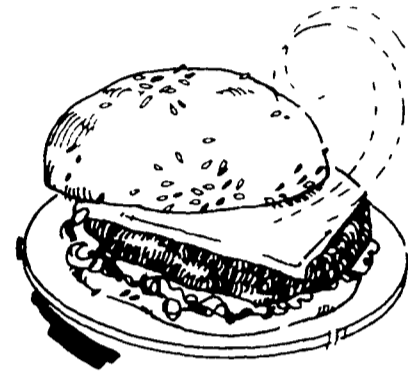
As one farmer who wrote to Successful Farming put it: "Unless we wake up the almost deafening message that we cannot overproduce meat and grain, and over-consume fuel and soil and have a healthy industry, we are all in for very, very rough sledding."

That is a very profound statement — one that could well guide agricultural policy matters over the next couple of decades.

There is a growing hue and cry over the depletion of our natural resources to supply world markets. There is growing dissatisfaction over the boom or bust farm economy of the past several years. There is a national alarm over soil erosion and its impact on future generations.

The question could be asked, "Are we exchanging over children's birthright, a productive agriculture and a bountiful food supply for some short-range profits and a better balance of payments?"

The Arabs and other oil-rich nations have said they will produce only so much oil per year for foreign consumption. Maybe it's time the United States to do the same thing with food — to set some limits on how much food will be shipped abroad and subsequently how much food production capacity will be lost to meet this demand.



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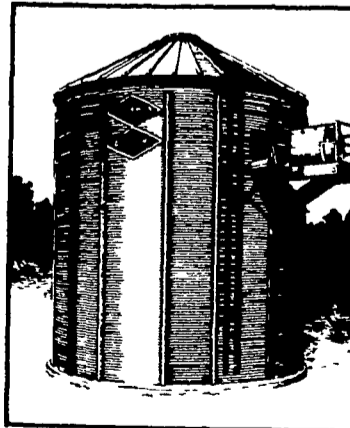


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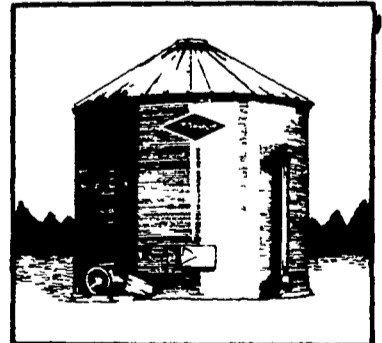
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